GAMEINFORMER®

SKULL
and
BONES

EDITOR'S NOTE

CHASING THE FREE-TO-PLAY CARROT

I'VE BEEN HONORED TO PLAY GAMES WITH THREE OUTSTANDING INDIVIDUALS almost every night for a decade. One is a friend I've known for 30 years. The other two I met in Overwatch matches at the height of that game's popularity. When we hook up to play, anything goes: We talk about life, get to know each other on a granular level, and often laugh until we can hardly keep our eyes open. We mainly play Fortnite these days but also bounce between anything noteworthy at the time. As much as I love a great single-player experience, nothing comes close in the gaming world to spending time with this crew.

Lately, I've been cheating on my group. My daughter, girlfriend, and her two boys have developed an admiration for Fall Guys. We're having an absolute blast playing it as a family. I usually catch wind of someone wanting to play right around the time my other group hops online. I don't mind having this conflict between friends and family, but it did throw up a red flag: both Fortnite and Fall Guys use the same free-to-play model.

The games are great fun to play in their own right – delivering excitement and plenty of screaming in any given match – and are heightened by desirable Battle Pass unlocks. I want to reach level 100 in Fortnite to unlock Darth Vader. The boys want to do the same thing in Fall Guys to get Mecha Godzilla. Epic Games and Mediatonic have created the perfect storm of delivering kickass games with kickass rewards. I should also point out that the paint never dries in either game. There's always a new mode, big event, or surprising addition to renew our interest and drive us to play.

I know I'm complaining about having a great time with two beautiful groups of people, but as someone who witnessed the rough beginnings of free-to-play gaming and how it exploited players, I don't feel comfortable going all-in on these titles. I don't mind buying a periodic skin or subscribing to a Battle Pass, but I still take issue with it being on a timer, coupled with the ability to purchase levels alongside it. That's a ticking clock that puts stress on the player. I hope Epic someday makes the Battle Passes last forever so we can pick away at them at a comfortable pace.

Until we speak again, here's hoping I unlock the Dark Lord of the Sith to use when playing with my friends and a crocodile head for my bean when gaming with my family. I'd love to hear about your free-to-play experiences and how often you play them. Shoot me an email at Reiner@GameInformer.com.

ANDREW REINER
Editor-In-Chief

WHAT I'M PLAYING
Fall Guys, Fortnite, Live a Live

WHAT I'M WATCHING
Thor: Love and Thunder, Hustle, Spiderhead

WHAT I'M READING
Eight Billion Genies, The Closet, Little Monsters

CURRENT MOOD
Ready for good things to happen

GAMEINFORMER
SKULL AND BONES

SKULL AND BONES

As Ubisoft prepared to unveil a new look at Skull and Bones, *Game Informer* met with game leads from the Singapore development studio for a more in-depth exploration of the project. We learned additional details about the winding path to the game's upcoming release, and how the game's creators hope to hook players in for a long sailing voyage.

Like the long-in-development game, our Skull and Bones cover shows a ship ready to set sail, but not yet out to sea. Its pirate crew member is ready for exploration into a setting that's a world away from the Caribbean locales that might first come to mind when considering a swashbuckling life. Whether from wildlife to be tamed or other ships in search of treasure, danger beckons on the high seas.

GAMEINFORMER

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Apprenticed in the study of acupressure, and may be able to kill with a single touch

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Blake Hester

Senior Associate Editor

Lately, I've been building Bandai model kits. I've worked through three Real Grade Evangelion kits (skipping the rest; I don't like the *Rebuild* movies they're from), built a few Gunplas, and some of the Figure Rise kits (Entry Grade Son Goku is excellent). More than anything, I just like the way it turns my brain off. I sit there for hours cutting pieces, sanding down nubs, and then piecing them together. It's soothing and – for no reason in particular – the perfect thing my sad, busy brain needs.

Alex Stadnik

Video Editor

Joy has been fleeting these days. The state of the world, mixed with the lack of new titles, has left me in a rut. That is until I got my Steam Deck. I've been able to return to old favorites such as Cuphead and A Plague Tale while also discovering new treasures. Without it, I wouldn't have gotten to some of the best games of the year, such as Neon White and Rogue Legacy 2. As a console gamer, the Steam Deck has been a revelation as I finally get to experience the discoverability and wonder of PC gaming, and it couldn't have come at a better time.

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spotlight

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In development since 2013, announced in 2017, and radio silent until 2022, Ubisoft's open world swashbuckling adventure is finally ready for its big showing. Our most pirate-loving crew member has seen the game and written 14 pages of exclusive details. And we're ready to share our treasures with you.

24 **SAINTS ROW**

Developer Deep Silver Volition must feel good about Saints Row, as it seems there's new info coming through every month. But this time, we got our hands on the game – for four hours, to be exact.

30 **MARIO + RABBIDS SPARKS OF HOPE**

Mario + Rabbids initially raised a lot of questions. But against all odds, these games have won over a sizable audience. Consequently, Nintendo and Ubisoft are making another one. We talked to the team about the anticipated second entry of this match made in ... something.

34 **THE SUMMER 60**

In lieu of an E3 this year, everyone and their mother had a press conference to show new games and advertisements. We've cut through the fluff, handpicking 60 upcoming projects you should be excited about.

76 **E3: A RETROSPECTIVE**

Speaking of E3, let's look back. Its path has been long, and gaming's biggest event has impacted the industry along the way. So, we explored what some of gaming's most well-known personalities had to say about the show.

regulars

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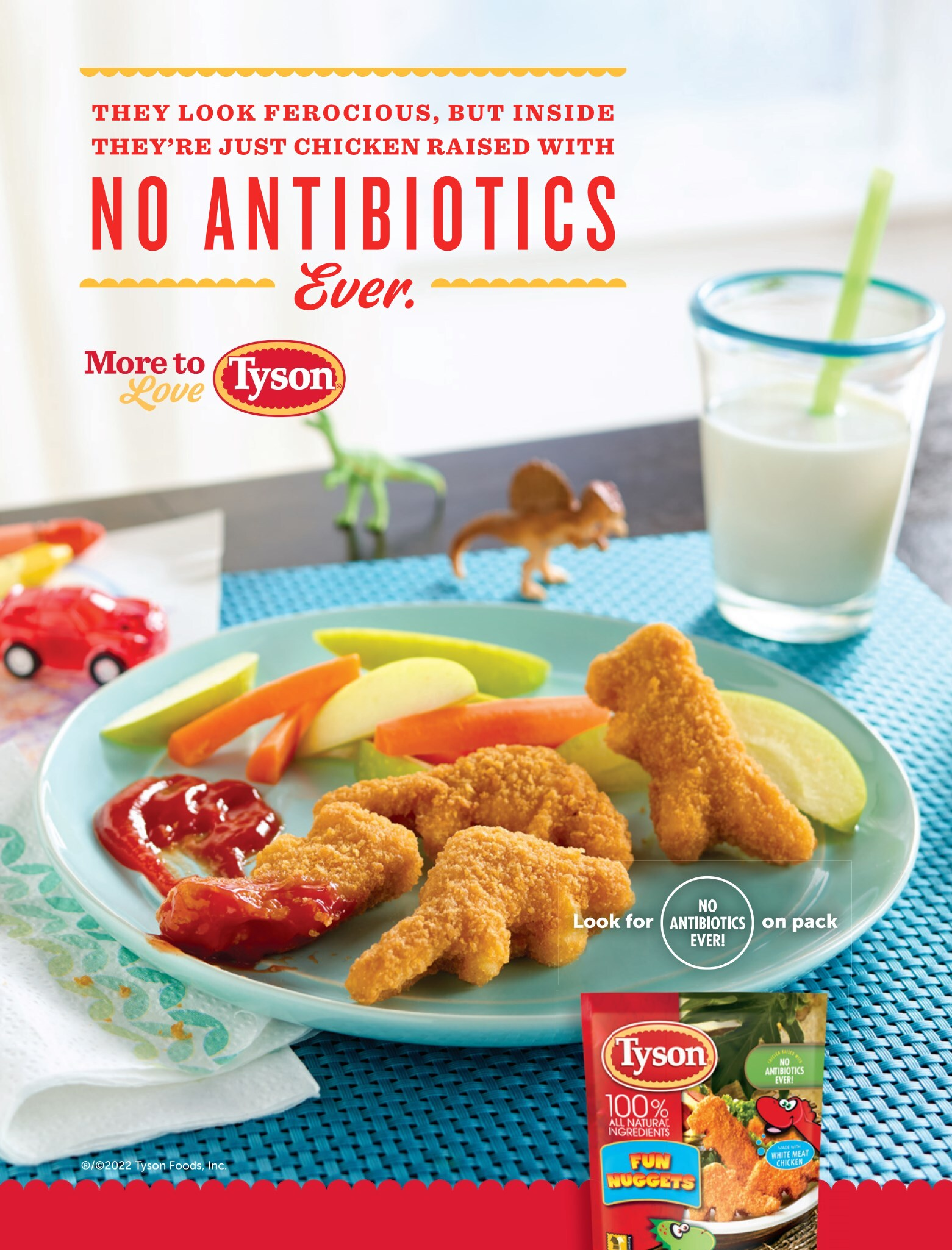
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Replies

SONIC FRONTIERS

I was surprised to see Sonic Frontiers on this month's cover. I recently watched a couple of gameplay videos on *IGN* and [thought] the game looked rather dull. After reading your impressions from several hours of playing it, I feel better about Sega's unique open-world approach. The combat and puzzle sections sound ambitious and fun. I won't buy the game until I read reviews, but it no longer rings my Sonic 2006 alarm.
– Javier Bote, San Francisco, CA

↳ Game Informer's *biggest Sonic fan, Brian Shea, played Frontiers for our cover story and enjoyed his time with it, saying, "the more I got into the gameplay loop, the more I liked it." The big questions he has are how the gameplay evolves and if it will remain fun beyond the three-hour mark. What he played was ambitious, and it would be a shame for Sega to let it flatline after the initial build-up.*

A part of me hopes Sonic Frontiers is excellent because we've been waiting decades for a good 3D Sonic game. Another part of me hopes it flops because that usually forces Sega to make more classic-designed 2D Sonic games, which I love playing. Either way, I can't lose, right?
– J.D. Wilson via email

↳ *Let's just hope Sonic Frontiers turns out fantastic, and its success warrants making a sequel* and *more 2D Sonic games. If the cosmic scales say Sega* has *to fail with a Sonic game to maintain balance, we recommend a developer make a Sonic VR game that's all about nauseous speeds and twirling motions. The pre-order bonus could be a reusable vomit bag wrapped in the same blue fur as the limited-edition Xbox controllers.*

R2-D2

We've been Jedi and bounty hunters and even the Dark Lord of the Sith, but why hasn't there been a triple-A Star Wars game that focuses on R2-D2? That little bucket of bolts is in almost every *Star Wars* movie and show and deserves to have a complete adventure of its own. The game could tell R2's origin story and flash forward to key points in its life. R2 would beep and chirp just like normal, allowing for humans, aliens, and other "talking" droids to tell the story. It would be a linear game, and I'd hire Sony Santa Monica to make it.
**– The First Jaguar 64 Fan,
Cape Coral, FL**

↳ *If* The Lord of the Rings' *Gollum is getting a game, so can R2-D2! We're into your idea and would suggest having C-3PO with him for a fair bit of humor. Our recommended developer would be Insomniac Games' Ratchet & Clank team. Those writers know how to bring cranky robots to life!*

FINAL FANTASY

Almost every video game series stays true to its core – from the story and characters to the gameplay and graphics. That isn't the case with Final Fantasy. Almost every mainline entry or spinout is surprisingly different. In the early days of the series, the characters and world would change with subtly different ideas for gameplay and visuals. Flash forward to today, and you could slap any random name on the game, and it could become a new IP. The connecting tissue is hardly there – maybe a Chocobo or that cactus thingy. I can't think of any other game series that has been such a chameleon. **– Sana Brown, Oakland, CA**

↳ *The Mario and Sonic games shake up the formula, but the lead characters and worlds are almost identical in tone. Final Fantasy is unlike anything out there, and if there is one thing that stays the same between each game, Square Enix tries to make them blockbuster experiences. Who would have thought that battling dragons would give way to a summer road trip at the end of days?*

BATTLE PASSES

We solved the problem with loot boxes. Yay, us. We now have the issue of battle passes, which I believe deliver even more of an urgency to keep playing or spend money to reach a certain level. It's all gross and wrong, and we are the ones to blame for consistently spending money on it. If we stopped paying for stuff, developers would stop trying to sell it. Wake up, people. **– Shawna Ortiz, Sparks, NV**

↳ *If that happened, developers would likely stop making that content, period. The days of playing a fighting game and unlocking 20 additional characters for no charge are long behind us. That's a sad thing to say. We lived through a great period of rewarding people for spending significant time with a game. Now, most unlocks are on a battle pass. The argument can be made: What if the game is free to play and the battle pass is the only way for the developer to make money?*

Reader art submission: Estefany Vasquez

Reader art submission: Anna Freligh

Soundoff: What Do You Miss About E3?

We asked *Game Informer's* Discord community to reflect on video games' biggest annual show, which was absent for the second time this year. Here are their responses:

It was that time of year when [publishers] made big game announcements. Now they are scattered whenever. Sure, we had a summer of games this year; it didn't feel like a single event but rather a collage of streams mashed together. E3 was dying, and the hype is missing with the move to cheaper streams and directs. **– Puga3_14**

I never got the chance to go, but from what I saw through live coverage, the socializing of people and sharing the experience with others made E3 special. **– SoulofashadOw83**

The "one more thing." **– Coreyamerson7**

The hands-on gameplay, props, and excitement. Talking heads and trailers are no substitute for seeing it and playing it, talking to developers and marketing, or getting a closed-door meeting. **– Skewednreviewed**

The many game announcements and surprises. It was a holiday for gamers. **– II_elden_ring_II**

ELDEN RING MULTIPLAYER

Like pretty much everyone else, I'm hooked on Elden Ring. It's breathtaking in both senses of the word, especially getting jump scared by giant bears. I hate those things. I've even learned to deal with the difficulty, mainly thanks to friends who help me on our weekly PlayStation sessions. That brings me to a gripe. Multiplayer in Elden Ring is too complicated to set up. My friends and I tried playing it online when it launched but couldn't figure out the whole mechanic until one of us did research outside of the game. That is a sub-optimal game mechanic if you have to Google how to join each other in a multiplayer session. Even after we managed to play together, it's not as fulfilling to be limited to boss fights and then disappearing back into your world. I want to explore the world with a friend like in Diablo, Path of Exile, Chaos Bane, and Torchlight. I also want some way to opt out of the bloody PVP stuff. I understand that others dig invading other players' games. I do not. It's annoying having to deal with some random stranger before we fight a boss, even if we win the encounter. And I'm reasonably sure I'm not alone in that opinion. **– Jim McGowan via email**

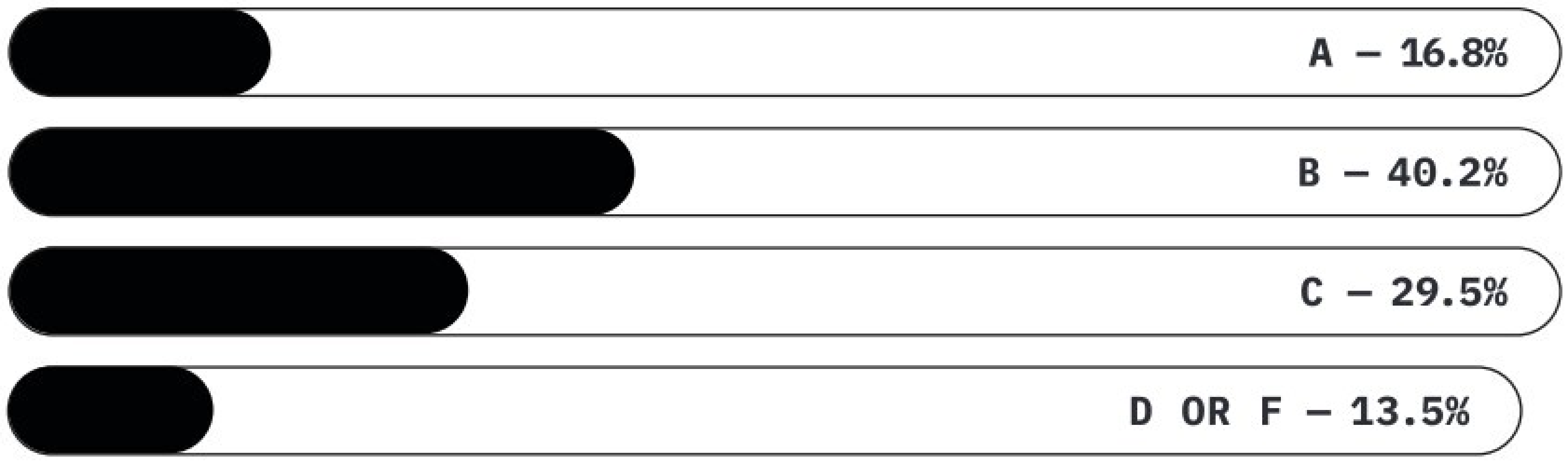
↳ *Most* Game Informer *staffers enjoy Elden Ring's approach to multiplayer and feel it's a vital part of From Software's Souls-like DNA. They also have the same desire as you to explore Elden Ring's dangerous lands with a friend at their side. If From Software makes an Elden Ring 2 – which seems inevitable at this point – we wouldn't be surprised if multiplayer is more of a focus. Picture this: As you explore a swamp, your friend cries out for help against a dragon in the valley. In a panic, you mount your horse and race to the battle's location. You draw the dragon's attention, giving your friend time to lick his wounds. In true From Software fashion, your presence has only made the dragon angrier and gains an extra health meter. We'll have to wait to see what From Software does next, but for now, we can dream about how cool it could be.*

↘ **Join the conversation**

Send your questions, comments, and rants to Feedback@GameInformer.com

Poll:

What would you rate this year's video game releases so far?



Poll conducted on Twitter

ETERNAL DARKNESS

I miss the days of games trying to mess with our minds. When I played Eternal Darkness for the first time, I thought my TV was having issues since the game would invert the image, pixelate it, and even alter the volume levels. About three hours into my game, I realized this was intentional. Eternal Darkness hit before the internet spoiled everything for everyone. Do you think a game like this could exist today and be just as effective? **– Cynthia Williams, Bowling Green, KY**

↳ You are right; the internet would spoil most elements of a game like this, but if the mind-warping elements are randomized to the point that the player doesn't know when to expect them, it could work and potentially benefit from the internet latching onto the chaos. And why not attempt this idea with a new Eternal Darkness. It's time for a comeback.

Soundoff:

Best Game of the Year So Far

At the halfway mark in the year, we asked our readers what titles deserve Game of the Year honors. Here are a few of their picks:

Elden Ring, for sure. One thing that I love about it is how every frame of that game has this incredible 1970s Prog Rock album cover aesthetic.
– Noah via Discord

For me, it's AI: The Somnium Files – Nirvana Initiative. I haven't played enough of Elden Ring yet, and nothing else has impressed me.
– Cody Perez via Twitter

The Game Awards answer is probably Elden Ring, but I've been enjoying OlliOlli Word, Tunic, and Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga so far. As for yet to be released? I think Cult of the Lamb is going to be something special and probably my ultimate GOTY. **– Salty Fingas via Twitter**

I liked Ghostwire: Tokyo. Very unexpected for me, but I loved the story and setting. Combat was fun. I enjoyed it. **– ZevZero via Twitter**

I haven't played many new games this year, but Elden Ring is probably at the top. My dark horse is Rogue Legacy 2. Just a great time if you're looking for a chill rogue-like (also, the humor is amazing). **– JHerb24 via Discord**

ABOUT YOUR REVIEWS

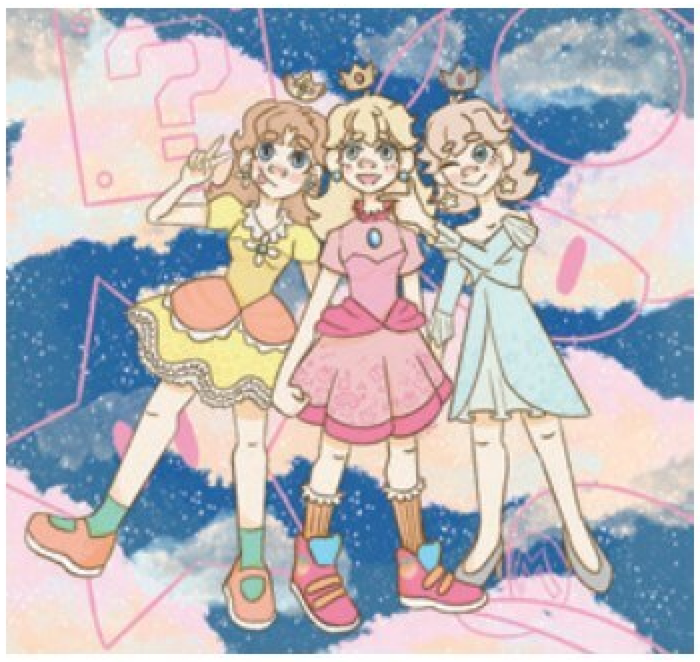
My friend and I did a test: We took 12 games to which your critics gave 9 or higher review scores and played through them to see what we would rate them. The only two games that we scored lower were Halo Infinite – we gave it a 8, *GI* scored it 9.25 – and Elden Ring – we gave it a 9, and you said it was a 10. Otherwise, most of our scores were the same, with just one being higher – we gave It Takes Two a 9.5, and you came in at 9.25. We were blown away by how similar our scores and takes were. You do good work, *Game Informer*. Keep it up! **– Grant W. and Ken S. via email**

↳ The big takeaway for us is that you played through 12 great games. We also like hearing that our team is doing a great job. Thanks for the kind words!

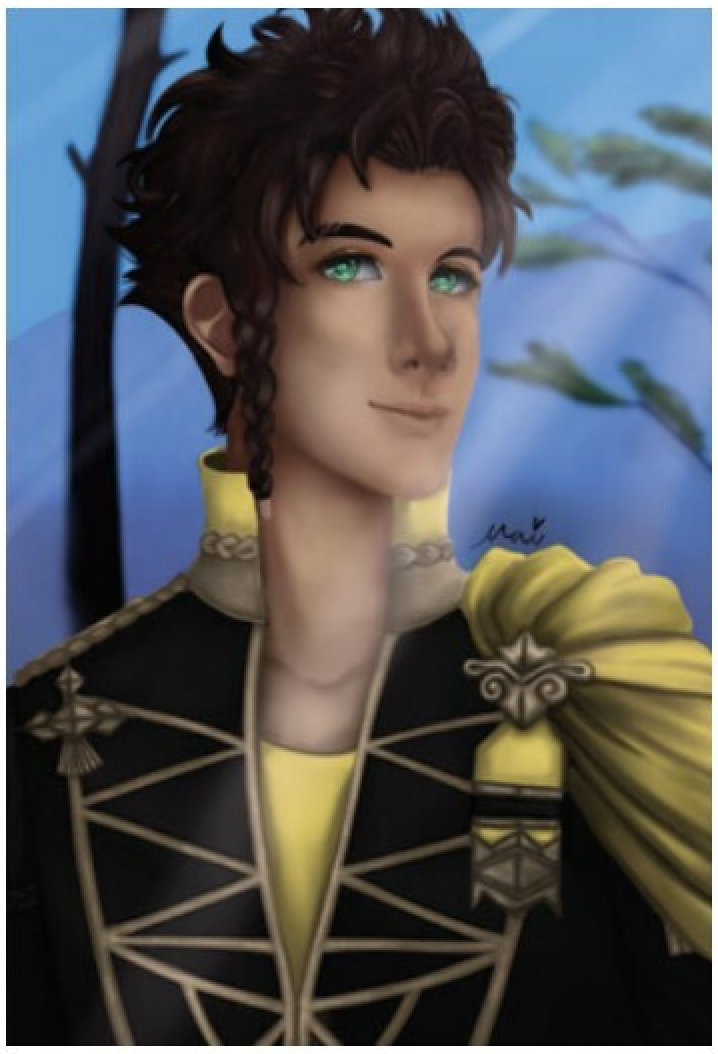
CALL OF DUTY

I know some people play Call of Duty every year, but I only check out the installments made by Infinity Ward. I start with the single-player campaign – which I always adore – and then spend a few months with multiplayer with friends. I don't know what it is, but the installments made by Sledgehammer and Treyarch don't feel the same or have the same emotional impact in their stories. I say hats off to Infinity Ward for making such incredible experiences each time. **– Chuck Bhullar via email**

↳ The Modern Warfare series of Call of Duty games is easily the most popular, but we do frequently hear people prefer the multiplayer in Treyarch's games. We all see different things in games, and it's nice to have three fantastic development teams delivering various experiences that we can latch onto.



Reader art submission: Elena Bort



Reader art submission: Amaya Phillippi

OVERWATCH 2

I used to play Overwatch religiously, and then the new content dried up, and I lost interest in the Ranked Play grind. My friends and I jumped into Overwatch 2's beta, and I thought it felt like a memorial – one last look at something I loved, yet it's slightly different than what I remember. Blizzard's initial messaging for the sequel was strong, leading with a story and the tease of new characters and modes, but what we have here in our first test makes it seem like more of the same. What say you, *Game Informer*? **– Jared Burns via email**

↳ The beta provides a glimpse of what Overwatch 2 will be. Blizzard is officially releasing Overwatch 2 on October 4, promising a wealth of new content on release. The PvE story you mentioned is coming in 2023 as seasonal content. Yes, having to wait that long after launch to see if we want to spend time with this sequel is disappointing, but if it means PvP is better out of the gate, that could be a fair trade-off as that's where most players spend their time. Check out page 63 for more on Overwatch 2's forthcoming content. ■

Reader art winner: Edward Kellner

↘

Submit your art for a chance to win a prize!

Please include your name and email address. Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media social media, and become the property of *Game Informer*. Email to: ReaderArt@GameInformer.com

GEAR

CREATE CONTENT, ENJOY CONTENT

BY MATT MILLER

① KEY LIGHT MINI

Elgato's solution for easy fire-and-forget lighting is a powerful performer, helping you look great for your audience of thousands, or maybe just for that video call with your virtual date. Either way, the all-light front panel features flicker-free LED lighting with tremendous range in both natural color spectrum and lumen output. It's small enough to clip onto your phone to take on the road and still an excellent solution for your desk or studio, with a light enough footprint not to overwhelm the space. Onboard controls work great, or adjustments can be made wirelessly on iOS, Android, PC, or Mac.

$99 | *elgato.com*

② MOBIUZ 4K 32-INCH GAMING MONITOR

Benq has come out swinging with its high-end 32-inch 144 Hz model, which boasts the ability to run Adaptive-Sync and blur reduction simultaneously, leading to an incredibly smooth 144fps. The color representation is outstanding, and the backlit LED helps HDR content pop. While it's an expensive offering, it's worth noting that this MOBIUZ includes a built-in audio system and speakers that will have you rethinking any bias against onboard sound. HDMI or DisplayPort 1.4 options make it equally at home for a console or PC setup. Slick, powerful, and feature-packed, it's a single purchase that can dramatically improve your gaming setup.

$1,099 | *benq.com*

③ SHURE MV7 MICROPHONE

The compact MV7 mic is one of those audio products that somehow succeeds well for everyone from experienced professionals to relative newcomers. Remarkable recorded sound quality makes this an ideal choice for streaming or recording, nailing accurate and crisp vocals with a variety of preset EQ and sound profiles. By connecting to the Shure MOVIV app, you can tweak specs to your heart's desire, or simply relish the excellent auto mode to get things right. It further has the flexibility to output via USB or XLR, or even both simultaneously, offering tremendous flexibility.

$249 | *shure.com*

④ RIG 800 PRO HX WIRELESS HEADSET

Nacon's premium headset has a lot going for it. While a bit chunky in aesthetics, the sound quality is exceptional thanks to 40mm audio drivers and a bass boost that helps games sound fantastic. The headset also earns high marks for comfort thanks to lightweight construction and cushy ear padding. The microphone is good but may need positioning close to the mouth for the best pick-up. The base station is a convenient addition, offering a tidy way to store and charge the unit without plugging in. The Pro HX is designed explicitly for Xbox consoles and PC and includes Dolby Atmos, but a PlayStation option is also available.

$149 | *riggaming.com*

⑤ ORBI MESH WIFI 6 SYSTEM

Stellar wireless connectivity is a high priority whether you're streaming from different locations around the house or have gaming stations in multiple spots in the building. Netgear's Orbi RBK852 system offers incredibly fast connections with reliable and consistent speeds even in larger homes or offices – up to 5000 square feet with the base unit and just a single satellite. Or pay for additional satellites to cover an even larger space. Less expensive mesh systems exist, but the ease of use and pure horsepower of the Orbi is hard to beat.

$699 | *netgear.com*

⑥ SONY ZV-1 CAMERA

Sony built this compact camera specifically for content creators and vloggers; it captures both video and stills with aplomb. Intelligent auto modes leverage Sony's long expertise and allow for professional production even without much experience. Even so, extensive manual tweaking is still available. The directional 3-capsule microphone, with included fuzzy windscreen, essentially eliminates the need for a separate mic, and the 4K video is top-notch. If you're creating content that takes you away from your computer and want more robust options than what your phone provides, the ZV-1 is a strong choice. ■

$649 | *electronics.sony.com*

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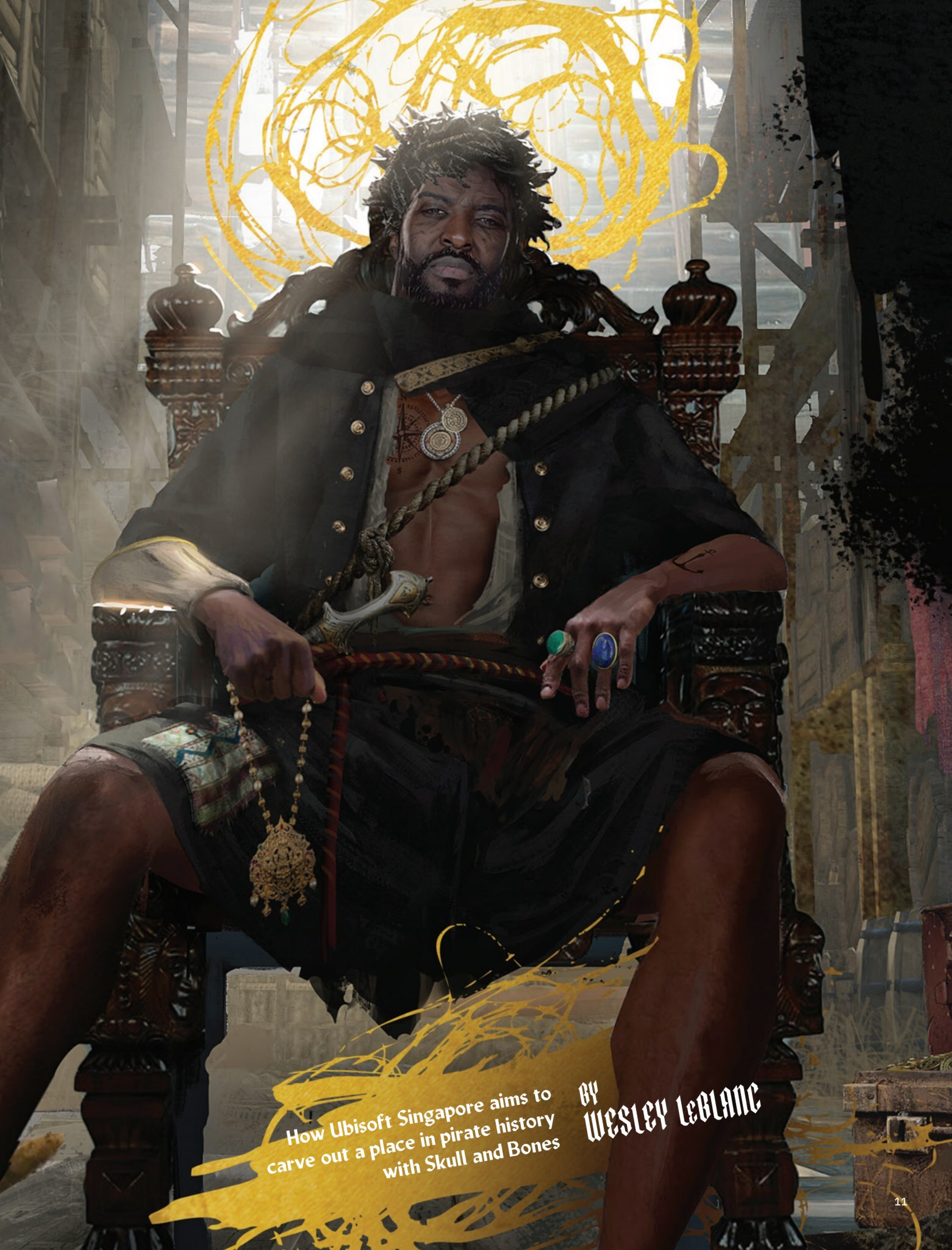


How Ubisoft Singapore aims to carve out a place in pirate history with Skull and Bones

By

Wesley LeBlanc

THE GOLDEN AGE OF PIRACY HAS BEEN HIGHLY ROMANTICIZED FOR DECADES,

despite the real history revealing that much of it shouldn't be. Pirate movies reached their Hollywood peak in the 1960s before going extinct, only to be revived thanks to Jack Sparrow and his escapades in Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise. Of course, games have had their fair share of swashbuckling adventures. Sid Meier's Pirates comes to mind, which is less about the fantasy of piracy and more about simulating the strategy behind a given pirate's success. Rare's Sea of Thieves – an open-world sandbox letting players decide how to live on the high seas – is another notable highlight. It even crossed over with *Pirates of the Caribbean* in a 2021 expansion called A Pirate's Life.

Then there's 2013's Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag, developed by Ubisoft Montreal. Black Flag was celebrated for many things. Chief among them: it nails the pirate aspect, giving players a look at the beginning of the end of piracy in the Caribbean through the eyes of assassin Edward Kenway. It features all the period mainstays, including sword-to-sword combat, flintlock pistols, and historical figures like Edward "Blackbeard" Teach, Anne Bonny, Jack Rackham, and more. Perhaps most impressive to Black Flag's commitment to pirates, though, is its naval combat. After all, no pirate ever became notorious by keeping their feet on land. Their fame lived and died by their deeds, and many of those deeds took place on the high seas.

Ubisoft is well known for its size, with studios worldwide. This size leads to extensive collaboration, one of the chief reasons the company can release massive games on a relatively quick timetable. Behind Black Flag is Montreal collaborator Ubisoft Singapore, a studio added to the publisher's lexicon of teams in 2008. Singapore was responsible for the naval combat and on-sea navigation debuting in Assassin's Creed III before being the star of the show in Black Flag. With more than a decade of work in these naval mechanics, spanning multiple Assassin's Creed games like Rogue, Origins, Odyssey, and even 2020's Valhalla, Ubisoft Singapore is finally ready to release Skull and Bones, its first IP and an attempt to secure its place in pirate game history.

This newfound confidence was palpable in July's re-reveal, and that's exciting because, for years, it seemed like the ship had sunk before it ever left port. After a promising reveal in 2017 and a few public showings at E3 and similar conferences, Skull and Bones' sails lost wind, and messaging around the game went dark. But now, with a November 8 release date in its crosshairs, Ubisoft Singapore is ready to tell the story of what happened. The developers dive into why Skull and Bones is a decidedly different game from the initial reveal and where its heading in the years to come, should player-made captains choose to support it after launch.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Stadia • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (20-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft
DEVELOPER Ubisoft Singapore **RELEASE** November 8

Ubisoft is aiming for a more realistic approach to piracy, with less emphasis on the romanticization of this era

MAIDEN VOYAGE

Skull and Bones was first announced as a 5v5 arena multiplayer battler set in the Indian Ocean during the Golden Age of Piracy. Setting it apart from Black Flag was the emphasis on naval combat. Instead of controlling a hero pirate at the center of all the action, you controlled a ship and everything else in the game built off of that idea. While that likely excited some fans, it wasn't what I hoped for when I learned that Ubisoft was making a new pirate game – far from it, actually.

Players and press alike, including *Game Informer*, went hands-on with this early Skull and Bones at E3 2017, and some liked what they played. That game iteration didn't have an official release date, but Ubisoft was aiming for 2019. Then in May of 2019, it was delayed to 2020, and just a couple of months after, rumors spread that Skull and Bones was reportedly getting a TV show to coincide with the game's release. News on that show and Skull and Bones then went curiously quiet. It slipped past 2019, then its new 2020 release date. Hopeful fans began to worry.

However, Ubisoft broke the silence last year, revealing that the game would finally be released sometime between April 2022 and March 2023. Then, another year passed void of any official Skull and Bones news from Ubisoft. However, *Kotaku* released an extensive report that paints a picture of rocky development for Skull and Bones including mismanagement, missed deadlines, multiple reboots, and a lack of a clear vision behind the project. The publication's report even mentions three sources with knowledge of the project's origin stating that Skull and Bones' development began as a post-launch multiplayer expansion to Black Flag. Beyond that, Ubisoft remained mostly silent on the status of Skull and Bones until earlier this July, when the studio announced it was ready to re-reveal the game.

July's showcase was just a taste of what *Game Informer* learned while interviewing a few of Skull and Bones' developers, including game director Ryan Barnard and creative director Elisabeth Pellen. Building the ship took years, but Pellen, Barnard, and the broader team are confident in the game's new November release date. Today, Skull and Bones is not radically different from the game revealed years ago, but it's certainly something else. Most importantly for Ubisoft, it's something unique, something divergent from the Sea of Thieves formula – a game Ubisoft isn't necessarily attempting to compete with – but one it nonetheless can't ignore.

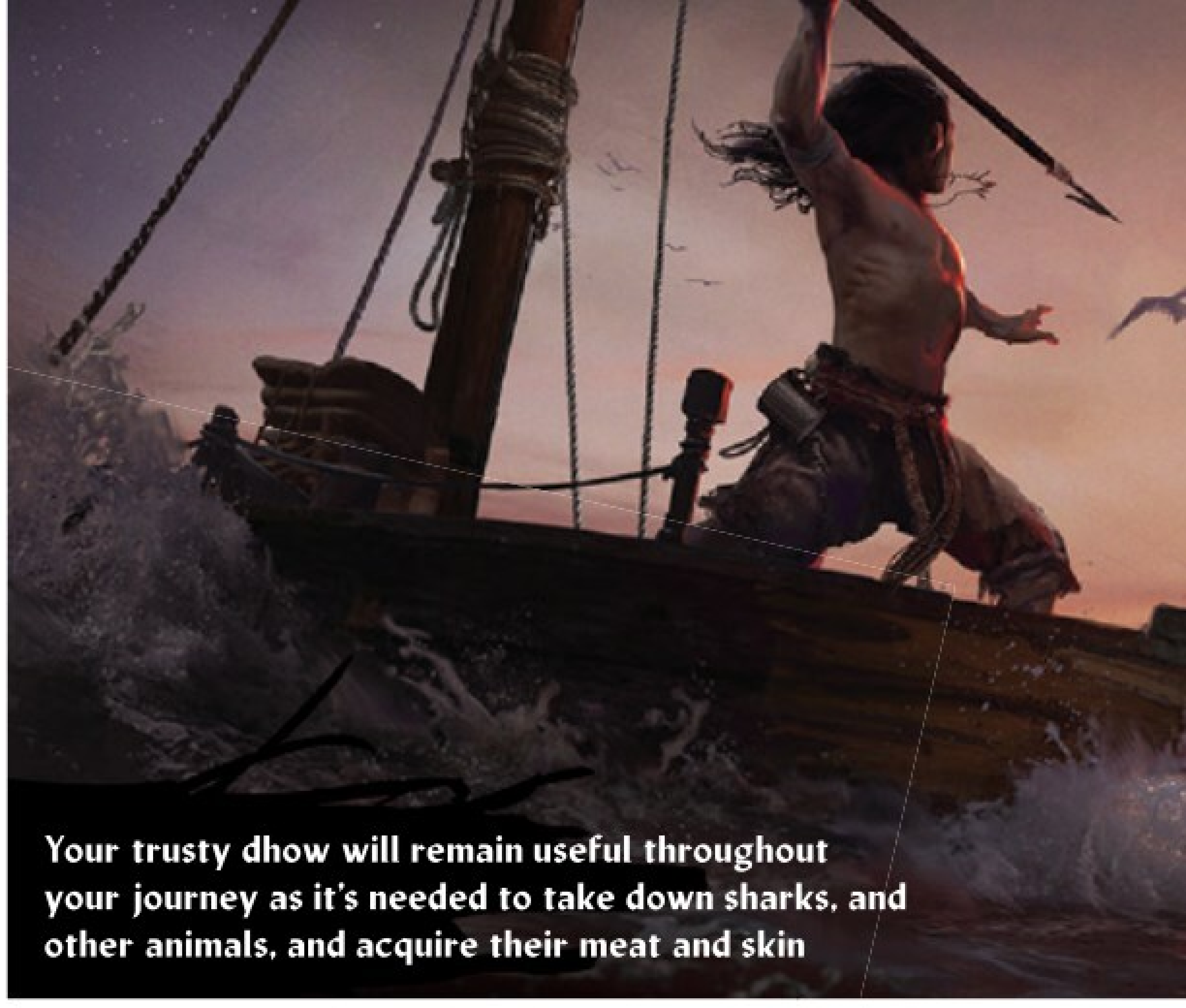
BRING ME THAT NEW HORIZON

The first question I asked Barnard was simple: what happened to Skull and Bones?

"[The] Black Flag naval combat was just part of [that] game," Barnard says. "Obviously, it was an Assassin's game. So how does that look when you try to take that and blow it out into a full-blown game? There were some directions and different things that the team has tried, so, of course, the question of the long development time always comes up, but when you look at the industry, it's not that unusual. Big games often have to take hard looks at where they're going and decide, 'Is this still correct? Is this going to reach the market we want?' So really, about three-and-a-half years ago, when Elisabeth Pellen, our current creative director, joined, is really when we took this [...] tact on modern piracy, the dawn of piracy in the 17th Century, and this kind of gritty approach. That gave the narrative wrapping for the IP and what it can be."

Barnard has only been with Ubisoft Singapore for about a year. Although, he did work for nearly five years at Ubisoft's Massive Entertainment with the team behind The Division series before a brief stint at IO Interactive. Pellen, however, has been involved with Skull and Bones since 2019 as a creative director.

"I had the opportunity to support other Ubisoft studios such as Massive when they were developing The Division or [Ubisoft] Paris when they were developing Ghost Recon Wildlands," Pellen says. "And since the team here received the green light to create its own IP, I thought it was the time for Singapore to shine and develop the same expertise."

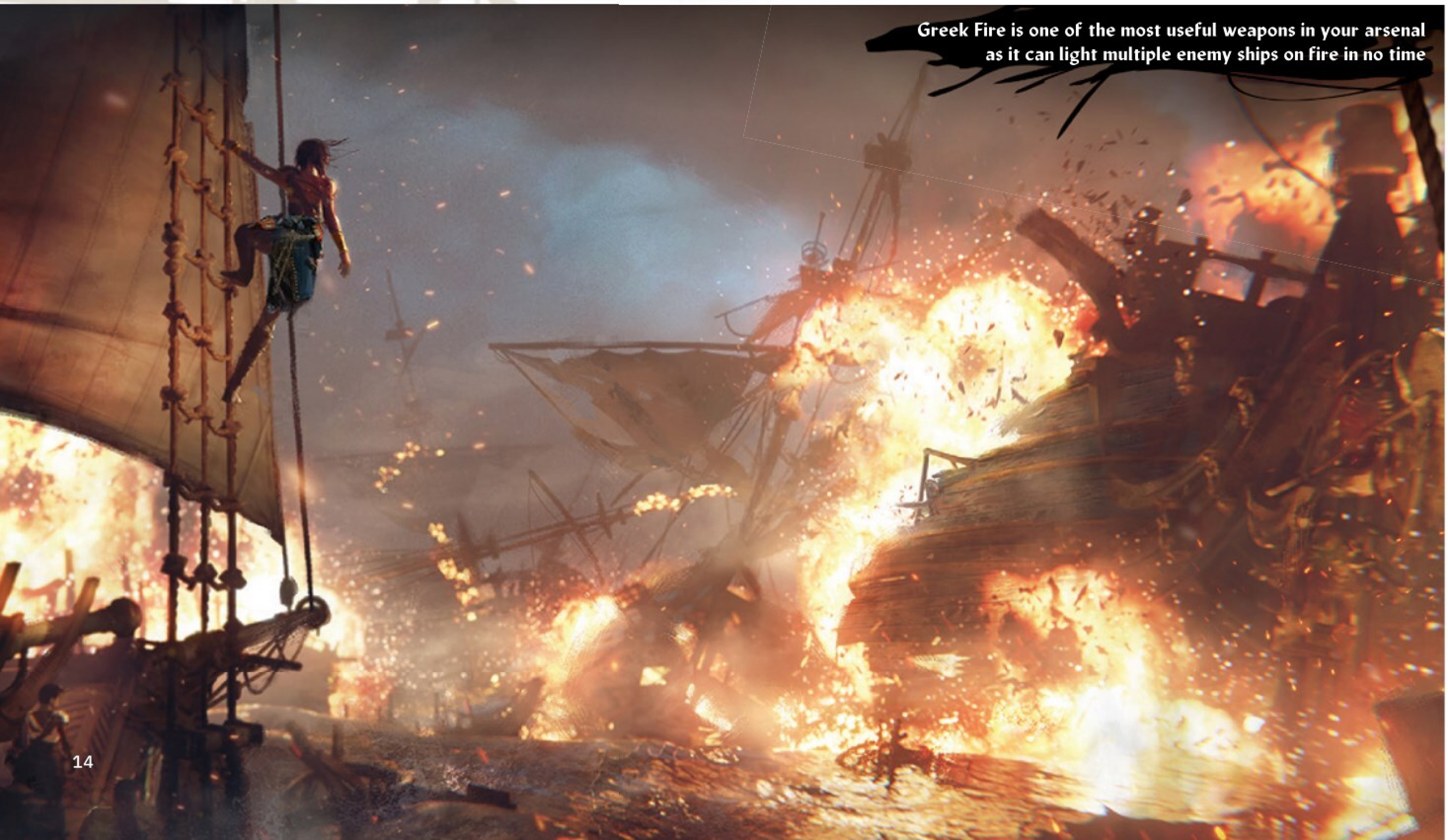


Your trusty dhow will remain useful throughout your journey as it's needed to take down sharks, and other animals, and acquire their meat and skin

Pellen saw Singapore and Skull and Bones as an opportunity to leverage her 25 years in game development and her expertise building open-world games for Ubisoft. It doesn't hurt that she loves pirates. She liked the prototypes of Skull and Bones and its first demos enough to move her entire life to Singapore to work on the game Ubisoft hopes will be its next big hit.

"I volunteered to help them consolidate and build an infrastructure around the gameplay because, again, the gameplay didn't change that much from 2018," she says. "So we added some features such as the obvious things – the mutinies and other systems – but most of all, we built the open world that didn't exist at that time to create a playground that will support that gameplay."

As for its five-year disappearance, Pellen echoes similar sentiments to Barnard, noting that my use of the word "unusual" when describing its public gap was not



Greek Fire is one of the most useful weapons in your arsenal as it can light multiple enemy ships on fire in no time

so unusual in the world of game development. She says it typically takes six years to build a game system and world for a new IP from scratch. On top of that, Skull and Bones utilizes an open world that fully simulates the 17th-century Indian Ocean – with some creative liberty, of course, in both player-versus-player and player-versus-everyone servers.

"The multiplayer dimension was quite challenging for a studio who had never developed its own IP," Pellen says. "So they had to develop a new IP and an entire open world because so far they were a collaboration studio and had only created parts of a game, not an entire game."

She says she's not privy to all the details as to why Ubisoft kept Skull and Bones in the dark for so long but suspects it has to do with the challenges of developing a brand-new project, finding the right timing for communicating a new vision, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the studio to go entirely remote for some time. There's also the reckoning that Ubisoft dealt with during this five-year gap, where current and former employees called out studio leaders for mismanagement, crunch, sexual harassment, and a generally bleak outlook on the work culture of the publisher's global studio network.

Another reason for Skull and Bones' gap in public-facing news was the release of new-gen consoles like the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S. Pellen says the studio decided to change the technology powering the game to take advantage of these consoles, increasing the overall quality. But in doing so, the team met a whole new set of challenges.

It's no secret that Skull and Bones has been through different iterations leading to changes in design, gameplay, and more. As for why, Barnard and Pellen tell me that the team was experimenting and trying to nail down exactly what it wanted to do. They also tell me that these kinds of shifts in development aren't unusual or uncommon – it's part of the process, or at least it is for Ubisoft Singapore. It has led to something unique in the space, according to Barnard. Skull and Bones appears to be the Ubisoft-ification of piracy, and, as a longtime fan of Assassin's Creed, Far Cry, and other studio staples, I can't wait to go hands-on with it this year.

RECKONING AT UBISOFT

In the summer of 2020, Ubisoft employees spoke out about their treatment at the publisher's various studios, including workplace abuse, sexual harassment, mismanagement that led to crunch, misconduct, and more. Ubisoft creative director Elisabeth Pellen was open about the recent shake-up and its effect on Ubisoft Singapore, which was at the center of it to an extent. She says, "maintaining team morale can be a challenge," but adds, "when our new managing director, Darryl Long, joined the studio, he was able to create a safe environment to help the team to focus on achieving our production milestones." The recent re-reveal of Skull and Bones and its now-public release date has "definitely lifted" team morale. On that same note, she says that the studio's turnover – including ousted studio director Hugues Ricour, who was accused of misconduct, and Skull and Bones co-director Antoine Henry, who left of his own unrelated volition – is the result of several factors. "So the turnover on the studio has always been high because to consolidate a studio made of local talent, we had to recruit some external talent coming from other studios within Ubisoft itself to bring in their expertise, but those people would stay for two or three years, so every time someone new arrived, you'd need to onboard those people and re-explain. Because of these various challenges we faced, the morale of the team went up and down."

"We're all very aware of the other pirate game out there that's really fun and great," Barnard says, alluding to Sea of Thieves. "But they have a tact, right, that's very 'Johnny Depp pirate [with a] parrot on the shoulder,' and we're very different. We want to offer a different pirate experience. So all of those combined is [...] why the game has come to the point that it's at and why it's so very different from what it was in Assassin's Creed. Hopefully, players, when they play it, they may have a little bit of that, like, 'Oh, I thought this was going to be Black Flag.' But what the game is offering, with the progression system, with the depth of combat, with multiplayer and playing with others – hopefully that's going to override some of those things than what maybe they had impressions of what the game could be."

HOIST YOUR OWN COLORS

In Skull and Bones, you begin as a crew member aboard a lawful ship. But after raging seas wreck it, you wash ashore on an island you've never been to before. Faced with the dangers of that island and the open sea you've sailed for years, you commandeer a small dhow, an Arabic sailing vessel, with just enough to get you where you need to go. Your fleet might grow to one day include your trusty dhow as well as other ships like the classic brigantine, the Sulawesian padawakang, and even the brig, a powerful weapons-heavy ship. You'll need to fend off local wildlife like sharks, hippos, crocodiles, and more as you attempt to chart a new course on life, and doing so will take place through a first-person spear-shooter mechanic. But soon after that, you'll find yourself face to face with some dastardly pirates.

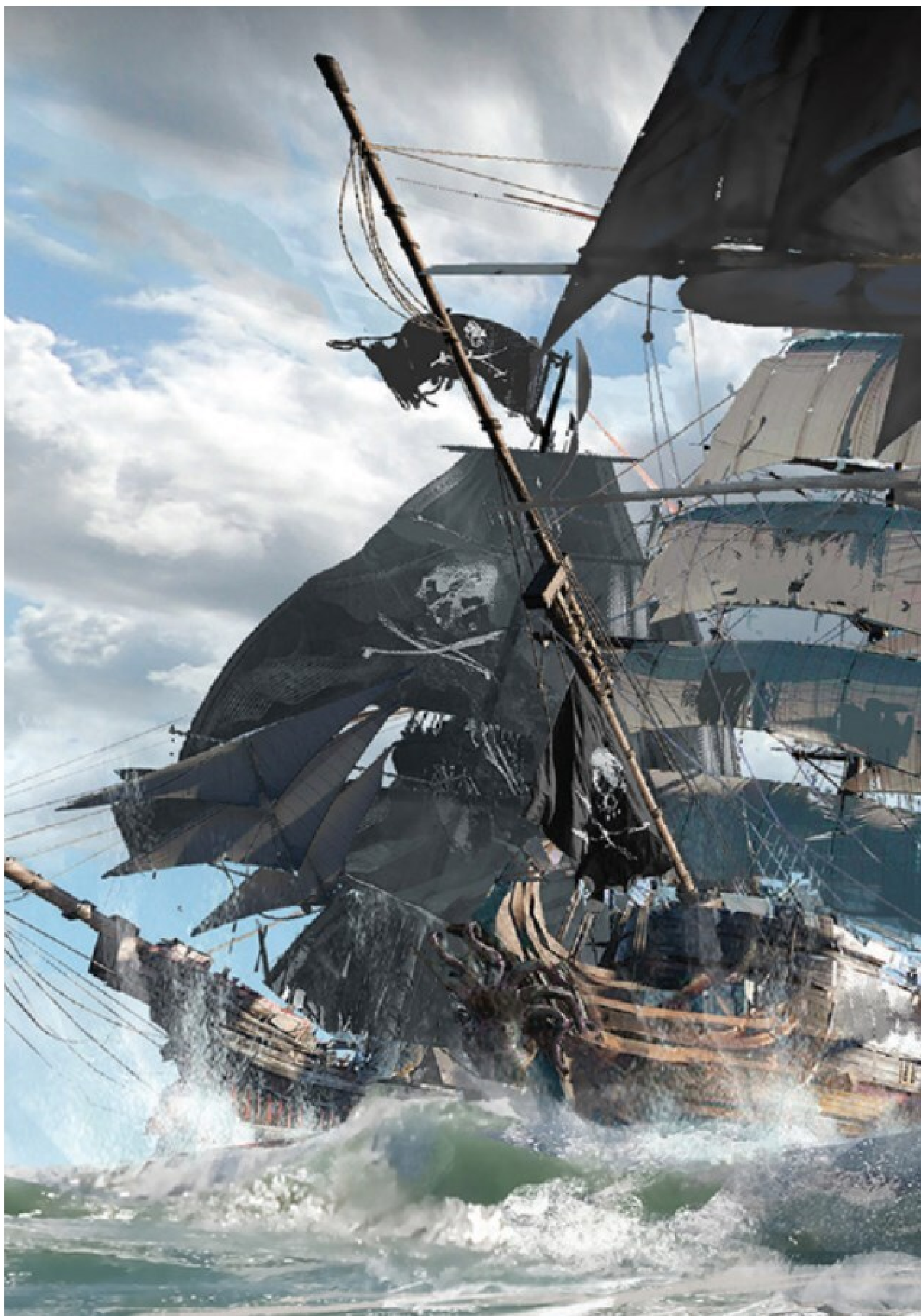
It won't be long before you accept contracts from them, build up a new life, and most importantly, create a name for yourself on the Indian Ocean. From there, Ubisoft Singapore removes its narrative hands, placing the storytelling under your guidance. Barnard says there will be a narrative that pushes you forward. It's based on a contract system that can boost or harm your Infamy in-game, but, despite that, the studio doesn't view Skull and Bones as a story-based game.

"I think that's one of the big shifts when we talked about Black Flag and the different games is that this is absolutely not an Assassin's Creed or a Far Cry," Barnard says. "There is definitely narrative in the game, though. There's actually a deep kind of lore narrative that players will investigate and discover, but there are also VIPs, or kingpin pirates, that they'll meet. And each of those pirates has a storyline or an arc that the players can engage with doing these jobs, which we call 'contracts,' for them. They'll get their background and go through a little story, but it's not a narrative game in that, you know, there's an ending, and then we roll credits. It's much more about the players creating their own stories. There is narrative in the game, for sure, but it's not a narrative-driven experience."

Being acquainted with the history of pirates behind Skull and Bones, I was curious if Ubisoft Singapore would name-drop real-life pirates like Mary Read or Charles Vane, characters that appeared in Black Flag. Barnard explained that while Skull and Bones is a pirate game based on the history of this era rather than something based on the romanticized vision of piracy, the studio crossed back and forth over the line between reality and fiction. It's set in the Indian Ocean and also features the coast of Africa. Some visitable locations

HISTORICAL INSPIRATION

I asked Skull and Bones art director Kobe Sek about the inspirations behind the game with the knowledge that it was avoiding previously-seen romanticized versions of piracy. Sek said the team's inspiration came from real-world objects. "We took inspiration from old master painters and learned how they depicted the sail shapes, movements, and waveforms to form the foundation of our visual language," he says. "In order to aid their research on ships, the team also went to L'armada 2019 at Rouen, France, to get inspiration from real ships and adapt it to our game. In addition, we took a look at historical materials from the time period such as logbooks, wax seals, wood carving maps, and even blueprints in order to give a bit more of a tangible and tactile approach when showing our ship customization and even UI design." Furthermore, he says the studio was not aiming for a photorealistic depiction of this time period but rather, "a more emotional interpretation of the experience of being in the open sea in our world." The goal is for players to view the ocean as both beautiful and destructive, and in-world memento mori will serve as reminders of both in the form of shipwrecks, natural scenery, fort formations, and more.

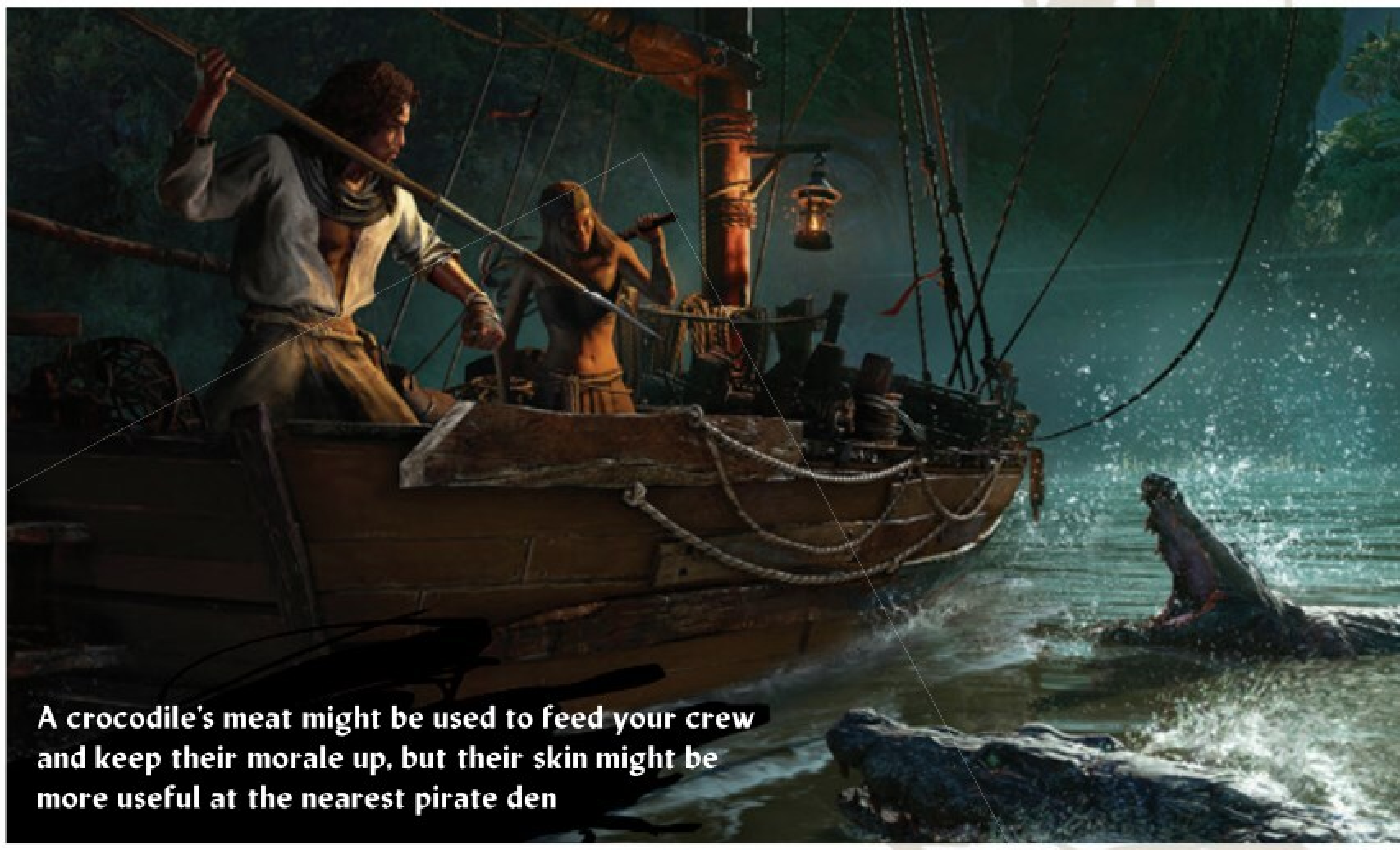


are real; others are not. The ships in-game are authentic, but perhaps weren't as popular as they might seem in Skull and Bones. History tells us some ships had forms of flamethrowers, but the mysterious Greek Fire that inspired these weapons was prominent much earlier in history.

"And so along those same lines, you definitely will see, or potentially can see, characters that are inspired by a combination of some of the different famous pirates of that age, but we won't have a 'Graybeard' in place of a 'Blackbeard,'" Barnard says.

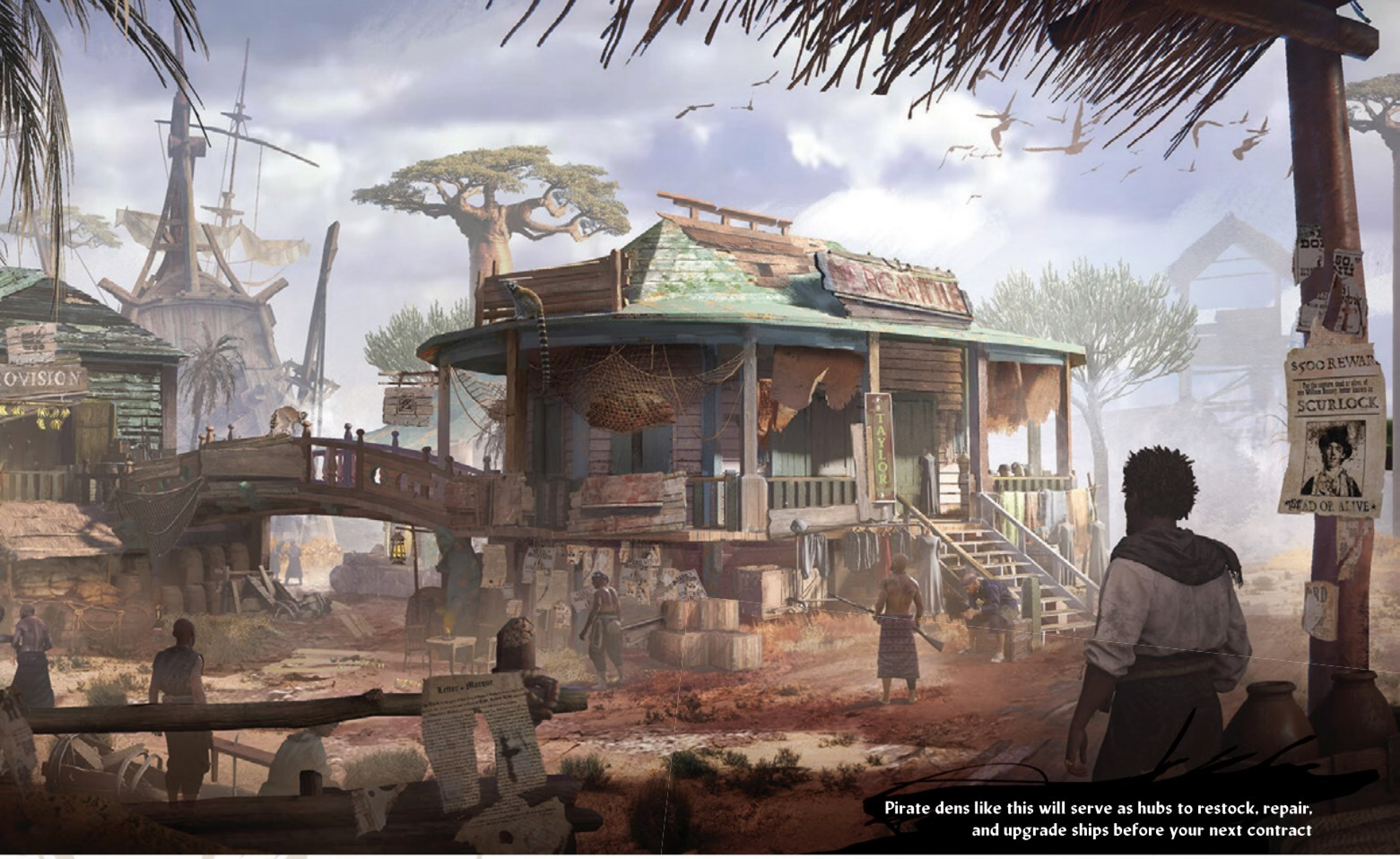
Pellen says the studio took some creative liberty in that regard, too, because it wanted more female pirates in the game; there were fewer in history compared to their male counterparts. In doing so and in creating a new pirate IP, Pellen says the team worked hard to avoid cliches. For example, it analyzed the trope of having a parrot on the shoulder. It looked at the meaning behind the trope and found it tells a story – it means the pirate has been somewhere exotic enough to acquire a parrot. That kind of between-the-lines storytelling is present throughout Skull and Bones. A pirate with tiger skin tells you they fought a tiger and lived to tell the tale. A shark bite in a torso tells a similar story, much like a pirate wearing a coat from a high-ranking officer in the British Royal Navy does.

Setting Skull and Bones in the Indian Ocean during the Golden Age of Piracy, as opposed to the end of it like in Black Flag, was critical to the storytelling and progression of the game. A pirate in the Caribbean might have to take down 25 ships and loot their cargo to become rich. In the Indian Ocean, where even more corporations were competing for trade routes and the riches of places like Africa, India, and East Asia, a single ship could take you from sun-bleached rags to Calico fabric riches. In a game about growing from outcast to pirate kingpin, having access to these riches is essential, and that's how the team landed on its setting. It doesn't hurt that it separates Skull and Bones from the pirate highlights most people think of, like Black Flag, Sea of Thieves, and *Pirates of the Caribbean*.



A crocodile's meat might be used to feed your crew and keep their morale up, but their skin might be more useful at the nearest pirate den

While the entirety of the game can be played solo, the team says cooperative play will give you the best Skull and Bones experience, both in terms of challenge and reward



Pirate dens like this will serve as hubs to restock, repair, and upgrade ships before your next contract

NOTORIETY ON THE HIGH SEAS

The world around you, including NPCs, merchant traders, naval armies, privateers, pirate hunters, and fellow pirates, all react to your rising Infamy in the Indian Ocean.

"We really wanted to give the opportunity to the player to write their own story and to feel that they are not playing the story of another hero," Pellen says. "They're really developing their own stories, and to do that, all of our NPCs will react to your actions and your decisions, and of course, your crew will react in a positive or negative way to where you take them in the world."

One of the most obvious instances is likely when you're marooned after a mutiny takeover. Pellen says when you return to a den, which are the larger hub-like outposts where your ship resides and where you craft resources, weapons, and more, pirates might mock you for your failure as a captain. On the flip side, you might be the talk of the town after "breaking into a giant fortress," and praised for your leadership efforts. She says the world, events, and the NPCs who give you missions will react to your deeds as well. Barnard adds some of the more notorious pirates won't even acknowledge you until you reach a certain level of Infamy.

That's because in Skull and Bones, Infamy is everything. Gold and other loot forms are worth going after in abundance, but nothing matters more than your notoriety. And you earn it across the game's 625 square kilometer map – a space larger than Sea of Thieves, Valhalla, and Black Flag combined.

"When I joined, [Infamy] was actually one of the first things that struck me so strongly," Barnard says. "We need to lean into this narrative, this idea that you're nobody without your name back then, right? And when you start the game, you are nobody; you are a survivor, basically, and you're going to interact with these pirates in dens like this. But those pirates don't want anything to do with you. Most of them don't until you start to do contracts or deals with them to build up your Infamy, and our progression system is all based around that."

Infamy takes you from Outcast, the title you'll begin with, to Kingpin, the highest honor bestowed upon a pirate. By completing anything in Skull and Bones, be it as intricate as pillaging a settlement, destroying a Dutch fort, or something as simple as taking out a fellow player with more Infamy than you, your Infamy will rise. The idea is that the more you do, the more pirates and merchants further out in the Indian Ocean will hear about your name, and more of the in-game map opens up to you as a result. So will the weapons, armor, merchants, and ships at your disposal.

"The unique thing about it is we're all about risk and reward with Skull and Bones," Barnard says. "So if you take on a huge fort, there's a potential gain and a loss."

When you get close enough to a fort or use your eyeglass from your ship's crow's nest, it reveals crucial information. You might learn about the importance of the loot, armor type, and more, and you see a bar that signals the Infamy gain and loss potential associated with it.

Destroying the fort might net you 100 Infamy, for example, but if the fort destroys your ship, you might lose 50 Infamy. That goes for contracts, other players on the high seas, navy ships, plunderable villages, and almost everything else in Skull and Bones. In terms of expected balance, Barnard says the team wants Infamy to be a mostly positive thing with just enough negative to keep you on your toes and wary of every situation you sail into.

As you gain Infamy, you'll rise in title rank, but within each of those, there are tiers to work through. For example, the Corsair title isn't a single tier but a title with several tiers. You might be one destroyed fort away from moving out of the Corsair Infamy rank and into the next one. However, you may be a few failed missions away from dropping to one of the lower tiers of Corsair, forcing you to work extra hard to be back at the highest tier of this title. This concept reminds me of Overwatch's ranked system, where you can ebb and flow through silver tiers, the bronze ones below it, and the gold ones above it. However, unlike Overwatch, you can't continually fall. If you're a Corsair, you'll never experience enough Infamy loss to boot you out of Corsair and into the Infamy title before it. You'll also never lose access to the rewards and unlocks associated with each tier of a given Infamy title. So if you're the highest rank of Corsair, which comes with unique blueprint-like unlocks and more, even if you drop to the lowest rank of Corsair, you'll still have access to everything from the highest tier.

"We want [players] to have the tension that [the Infamy loss and gain mechanic] brings because everything in the game means something," Barnard says. "Cargo means something. All the resources in the world mean something. When you take on a ship and try to sink it, that means something. It's not just shoot everything that moves because we want people thinking about what they're doing."

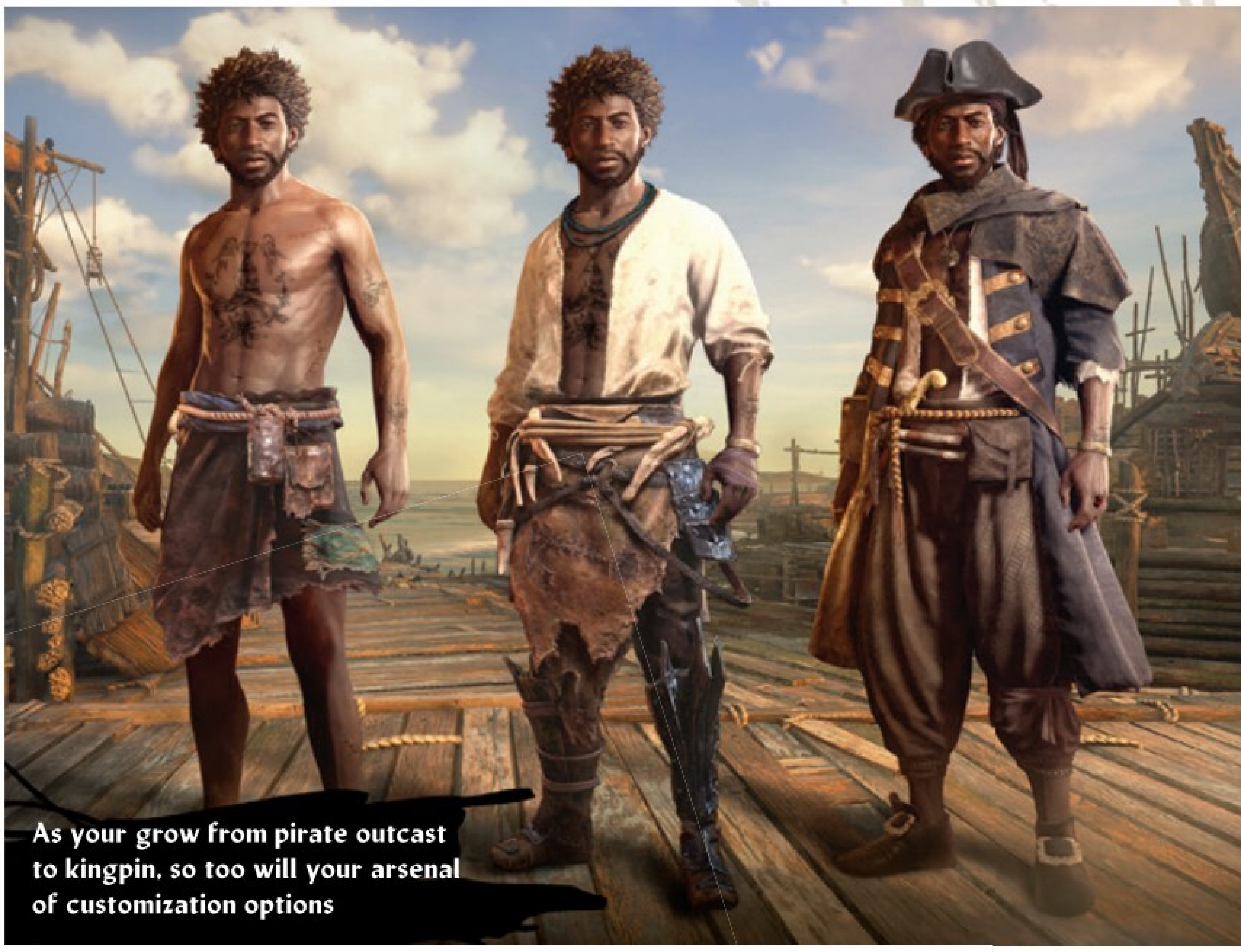
One of my least favorite things about Sea of Thieves, an otherwise very good pirate game, is that anybody can sink your ship at any time, potentially laying waste to hours of loot collected onboard. There's really nothing wrong with this in theory – it's a pirate's life for me or something like that, right? But what about when a player repeatedly goes after you more maliciously? What if you don't have loot aboard your ship and the enemy recognizes your inability to fight them off, say in a one-versus-four fight? That's commonly referred to as griefing, which can ruin any game. When Barnard began talking about the ability to take out other player pirates to steal their loot, I immediately asked about griefing and if Skull and Bones has any systems to prevent it. There are two, he told me.

The first is directly respondent to the Infamy system. Taking down players of higher Infamy will reward you with more Infamy than taking down some who hold the same title as you. And if you target players with a rank significantly lower than yours, you'll lose Infamy. Say you're a Kingpin, and you targeted someone just beginning their pirate journey as an Outcast, you wouldn't gain any Infamy – you'd lose it. In-game matchmaking on the PvP servers aim to prevent many Outcasts from being in a world with Kingpins to begin with, though.

"We don't want to prevent that [mismatched fights] from happening, because it's a PvP space [...] and we don't want to police it as much as possible, but we don't want to encourage it," Barnard says. "So it could absolutely still happen, but they're gaining nothing, and they're actually hurting themselves by griefing."

"There are ways players can get themselves out of that situation where they respawn if they're sunk," Barnard continues. "They can also just say, 'You know what, I'm not quite ready for this,' and choose PvE. It's opt-in PvE, and there's no loss of progression; there's no penalty. So there's no way you're ever trapped in a bad griefing situation by other players. But that's something we'll monitor. If we really find that it becomes a real deterrent to playing in the PvP environment, which is really the core experience for Skull and Bones [as] that's what we're balancing and developing everything for, then we can make adjustments."

Ubisoft Singapore is eyeing 20 players per server for launch, and each will be a dedicated server. You can group up with two friends for a total of three or use the built-in matchmaking system to buff your pirate armada with randoms. When you group up, you might get pulled into a new server with your friend or new ally, and this is one of the only instances of a loading screen in Skull and Bones. You'll see a loading screen when you're sunk, when you first load into the game, and when you head onto land, such as a den.



As your grow from pirate outcast to kingpin, so too will your arsenal of customization options

THREE SHIPS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

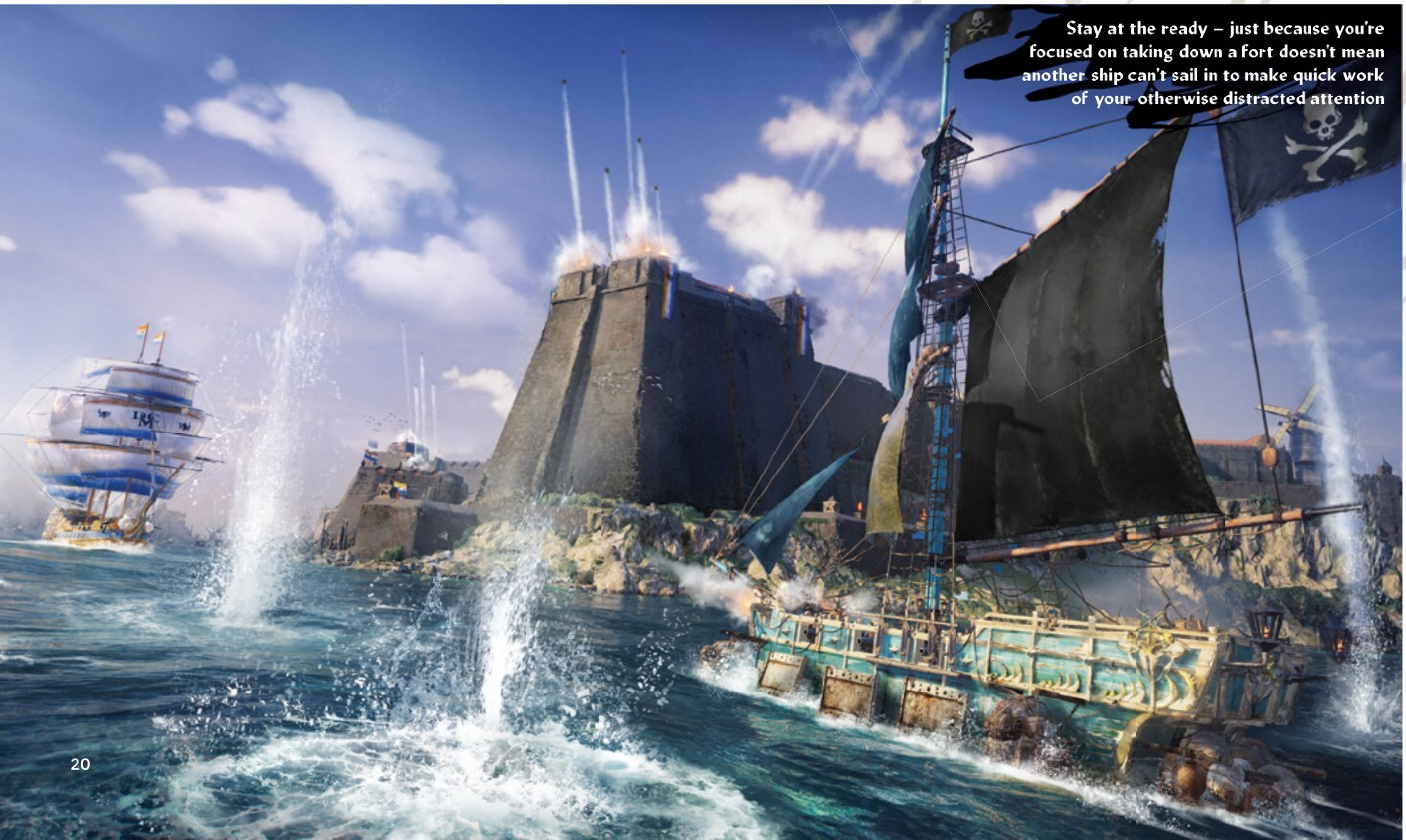
At launch, there won't be any pirate guilds or alliances. But the team has post-launch plans to bring these kinds of systems into the game; the studio hasn't shied away from the idea that Skull and Bones is, at its best, a co-op experience.

"We absolutely have a plan where you can play through the game all the way up to endgame, but of course these types of games [...] are better with others," Barnard tells me. "When you have all the ships, you have your entire fleet, you have all the armor, all the weapons, what challenges are going to be in place for you that keep it interesting? That's what the endgame is for us, and so there will come a point where you can be playing solo, but you may be highly encouraged to group with other pirates because in order to keep it interesting and rewarding, we need to make it more challenging. It comes to a point where you're definitely going to want to look for other players to group up with, which I think is just a good thing, right?"

Speaking of the endgame, Barnard and Pellen weren't able to disclose exactly what it is – that's coming at a later time – but it's not akin to something like World of Warcraft where the true game starts at Level 60, they say. There's not a huge power spike in that regard because the team wants everyone to reach the endgame with all of their favorite ships and tools remaining relevant. While they wouldn't disclose exactly what the endgame is, Barnard did drop some hints: "Again, it's all about risk and reward, so it's put in the player's hands of how much do they want to basically modify what they're doing to up the risk but also up the reward. That's all I can really say about that."

LOOKING BEYOND THAT NEW HORIZON

Ubisoft Singapore has content planned to engage players "for years to come," according to Barnard. I asked him if this is more of a Fortnite-style live-service game with a battle pass driving everything or if it's more like Bungie's Destiny series, which uses a games-as-a-service model that's all about a scheduled and steady flow of content to increase a players' in-game power continually. He says it's a bit of both, and that as you rank up in Infamy, you'll gain access to new tiers of ships, weapons, armor types, and more. But unlike in Destiny, for example, where a gun you unlocked hours ago might be irrelevant because it simply



Stay at the ready – just because you're focused on taking down a fort doesn't mean another ship can't sail in to make quick work of your otherwise distracted attention

BELIEVABLE FANTASY

Art director Kobe Sek says that while the world, ships, and characters of Skull and Bones were built through historical research, not everything the team has done is historically accurate or realistic, echoing both Pellen and Barnard. "Instead, we took inspiration from the research we did to be able to create a believable fantasy that functions in a very grounded way," he says. "With that in mind, we have the room to scale our visual ideas creatively from gritty and grounded but potentially more crazy and fantastical in the future as the game evolves and depending on what our players are interested in." He says overall, a pirate's ship can reflect the pirate behind its wheel.

can't compete with the weaponry you're obtaining now, what you unlock, craft, and build in Skull and Bones will hopefully stay relevant throughout your journey. Skull and Bones' progression isn't about building the biggest ship and using it exclusively.

The dhow will always be vital for hunting animals because it allows you to get close enough to spear them. You can't attack a group of sharks aboard a brig because the ship will blow through them, making their skins and meat useless. On that same note, the brig, a powerful "firepower" ship, won't be the end-all-be-all to every problem. Sometimes, your mission requires a fast escape, and the brig is hard to maneuver. In this instance, you might need a "navigation" ship, the fastest class in the game, but they have less cargo space and are easier to take down. There are also "cargo" ships, which are built for carrying large amounts of loot back to dens, but they're slower and harder to sail. Barnard mentioned a rock-paper-scissors mentality in how these ship types work against and with each other.

You'll need to tinker with each ship type to determine a build that works for the given mission. That's right down to the armor type, which includes leather, wood, metal, terracotta, and more, and the weaponry, which can be placed on the bow, port, starboard, stern, and auxiliary (or center) of the ship, and even furniture. Different types of furniture grant you bonuses such as increased ship health or a reduction in the rate at which your sails' break meter builds up. It's easy to see how these systems can also play into other aspects of Skull and Bones. Crew morale, which is dictated by your actions and your ability to keep them fed, can dip low enough that they perform a mutiny.

"There is no interaction with the mutiny," Pellen says. "What is more important is what comes before the mutiny because you want to avoid it. You have a morale [meter] that goes from the maximum – this is where you can perform the boarding of other ships – and the minimum. So when you reach the point of the mutiny, your crew can maroon you on an island, and you lose your ship, your crew, and your equipment, and you have to go back to a port with a smaller ship."

Mutiny and marooning happen dynamically. While traveling from point A to point B, you might get entangled in a fight between pirates and Dutch, French, or British merchants, or a privateer chasing after a notorious player. If you anger a Dutch merchant, for example, you might lose access to a port or outpost and associated commerce controlled by them on the map. Rogue A.I. pirates might decide to stake their claim on the cargo aboard your ship while you're in the middle of another fight. Perhaps you're plundering a village or attacking a fort – another player might see this as a perfect opportunity to attack and take your loot. You might be sailing through rough waters, the result of a stormy world event, only to stumble across a merchant ship that needs protection on its way back to a den or port. They'll offer you a contract to do just that in return for resources, materials, and Infamy. Barnard says the team focused on having a good mix of diegetic in-world feedback and traditional U.I.. Maybe you find a message in a bottle mid-mission, which leads to its own fun experience.

"These will challenge your ability to identify some landmarks," Pellen says. "Let's imagine you recognize an island shaped like a dragon. You dock to the beach, and you switch from controlling your ship to controlling your captain in third-person view. Then you will have a [...] compass that will guide your character in a direction [...] to find the treasure."

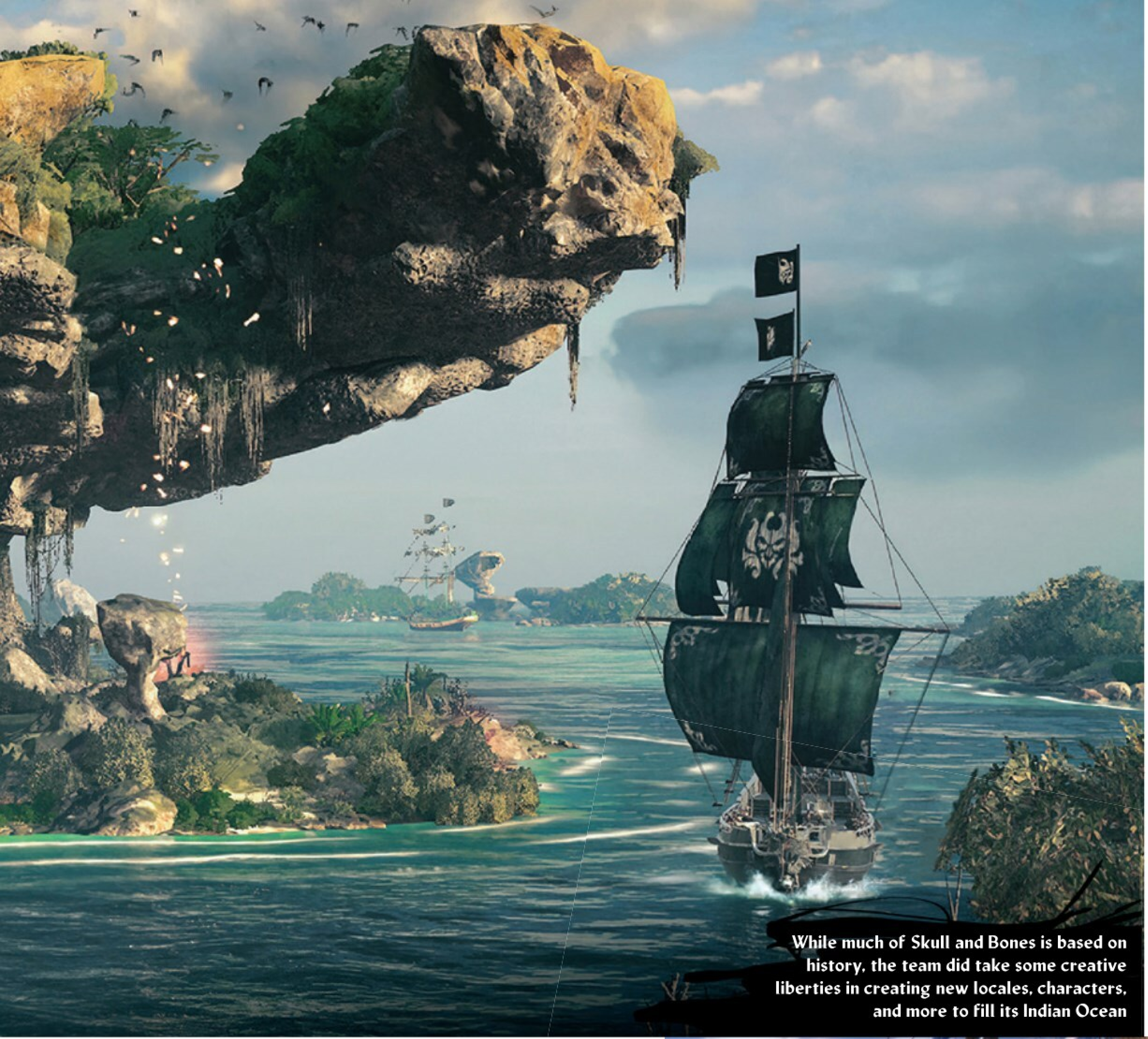
Pellen says these experiences were built-in to give players the feeling that they are truly the captain, on land and sea. She says that you can't fight other players or enemies on these islands, though, because the team focused on naval combat. Barnard described these treasure map sections as a one-part puzzle and one-part exploration.

"This is why we created all sorts of big islands because, in post-launch, we will add different content and features," Pellen says.

Post-launch content won't include just experiences but customization options too. At launch, you'll be able to customize everything: your captain, what they're wearing, emotes at your disposal, your ship's sails, its name, colors, weaponry, armor, and more. You'll even be able to acquire different animals to join you aboard, like a cat or a lemur. Seasons and seasonal content will also play into Ubisoft Singapore's post-launch efforts.

Barnard mentioned holidays like Halloween and Christmas making an appearance in Skull and Bones, with associated in-game content for each and actual seasons the game will go through, akin to Fortnite or other live-service games. This approach ties into the battle passes, and all of this post-launch content will be free. He tells me there will be microtransactions, but they're strictly cosmetic. These cosmetics are where the team strays most from its more historical, "darker and grittier" take on pirates, but don't expect them to get too zany or whimsical – they'll remain plausible within the world much in the same way flamethrowers will remain plausible despite not being a typical weapon aboard a ship during the Golden Age of Piracy. Sure, flamethrowers will be there, but they'll look and feel like they would if they were used in the 17th Century.

That's part of the excitement in creating a new IP, Pellen tells me – making it yours, or in this case, that of Ubisoft Singapore. I asked Pellen about what it feels like with Skull and Bones just months away from launch. It's the studio's first new IP and first game where it's the lead on the project. It's built on the back of a beloved system, naval combat, from an excellent game, Black Flag, in a fan-favorite series, Assassin's Creed,



While much of Skull and Bones is based on history, the team did take some creative liberties in creating new locales, characters, and more to fill its Indian Ocean

but it's decidedly its own thing. It's also a game many, including myself, have doubted in its five-year gap and one attempting to join a pantheon of titles for a publisher that receives commercial success more often than not.

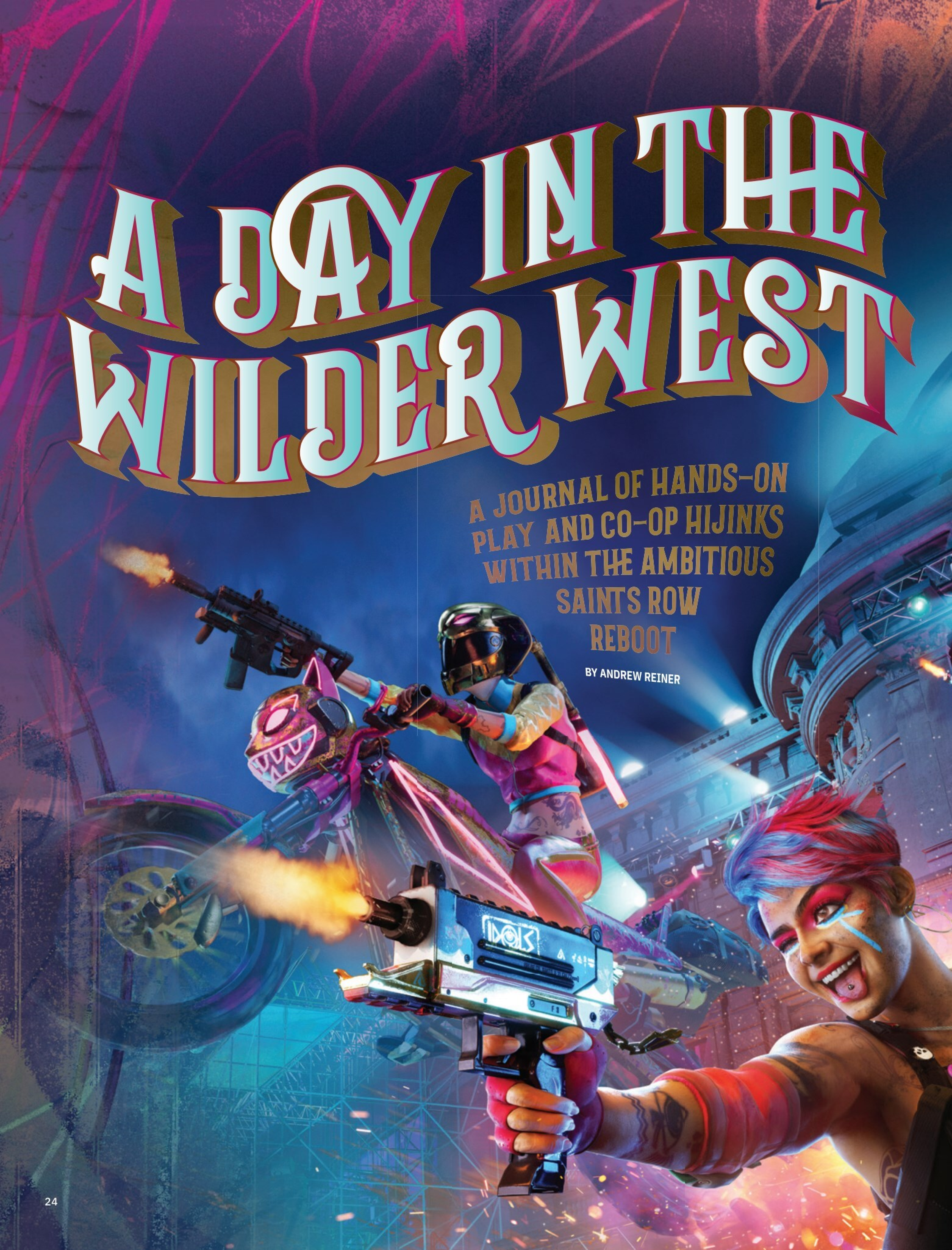
"I think it's a mixed feeling of excitement and fear," she says. "Because when you work on a new IP, you don't know if it's going to be as successful as expected. But this is the reason why we also created a game as a service that is meant to evolve and improve over the years. This is what the team understood, and this is what they are excited about, to continue to scale the experience with the player."

That's what has me most excited about Skull and Bones. What will it be at launch? What will it be a few months later, a year later, and perhaps a few years later? I've never stuck with a live-service game for too long, but as a fan of pirates and someone looking for something new in this space, Skull and Bones feels like it could hook me in. Barnard, Pellen, and the team certainly sound in it for the long haul, but that remains to be seen. Tides change in the games-as-a-service space, and I'm excited to see how Ubisoft Singapore handles each rise and fall in Skull and Bones. ■

A DAY IN THE WILDER WEST

A JOURNAL OF HANDS-ON PLAY AND CO-OP HIJINKS WITHIN THE AMBITIOUS SAINTS ROW REBOOT

BY ANDREW REINER



Boisterous business discussions and the clanking of silverware ring out from the crowded patio of a corner restaurant in the heart of Champaign, Illinois, a small college town two hours south of Chicago. Lording over these hungry patrons is the stoic face of Deep Silver Volition. The studio's logo hangs a few stories above the lunch spot on the side of a brownstone building. Many eating here today are likely Volition employees, and they have reason to celebrate with a feast, as their studio's next game, Saints Row, is nearing completion.

After a short elevator ride up to Volition's offices, I meet Rob Loftus, the executive producer behind the game. He has a bounce in his step, matched by enthusiastic words. He says I'll be playing through the beginning of the game on PlayStation 5. I'm free to explore its world, take on missions, or do whatever I want for roughly four hours. The only caveat: I can't talk about a specific opening moment because it's a huge spoiler.

I boot up the game, eager to see how Saints Row is shaping up and to learn what this big spoiler is. In the opening seconds, I see the Saints as I remember them: adorned in purple hues and partying like it's the end of days. The iconic gang has turned a rundown church into a headquarters functioning like a nightclub with colored lights on the dance floor and drinks flowing like a river from the bar. This joyful moment is framed within a fun montage sequence showing a variety of detailed animated sequences captured with cinematic camerawork.

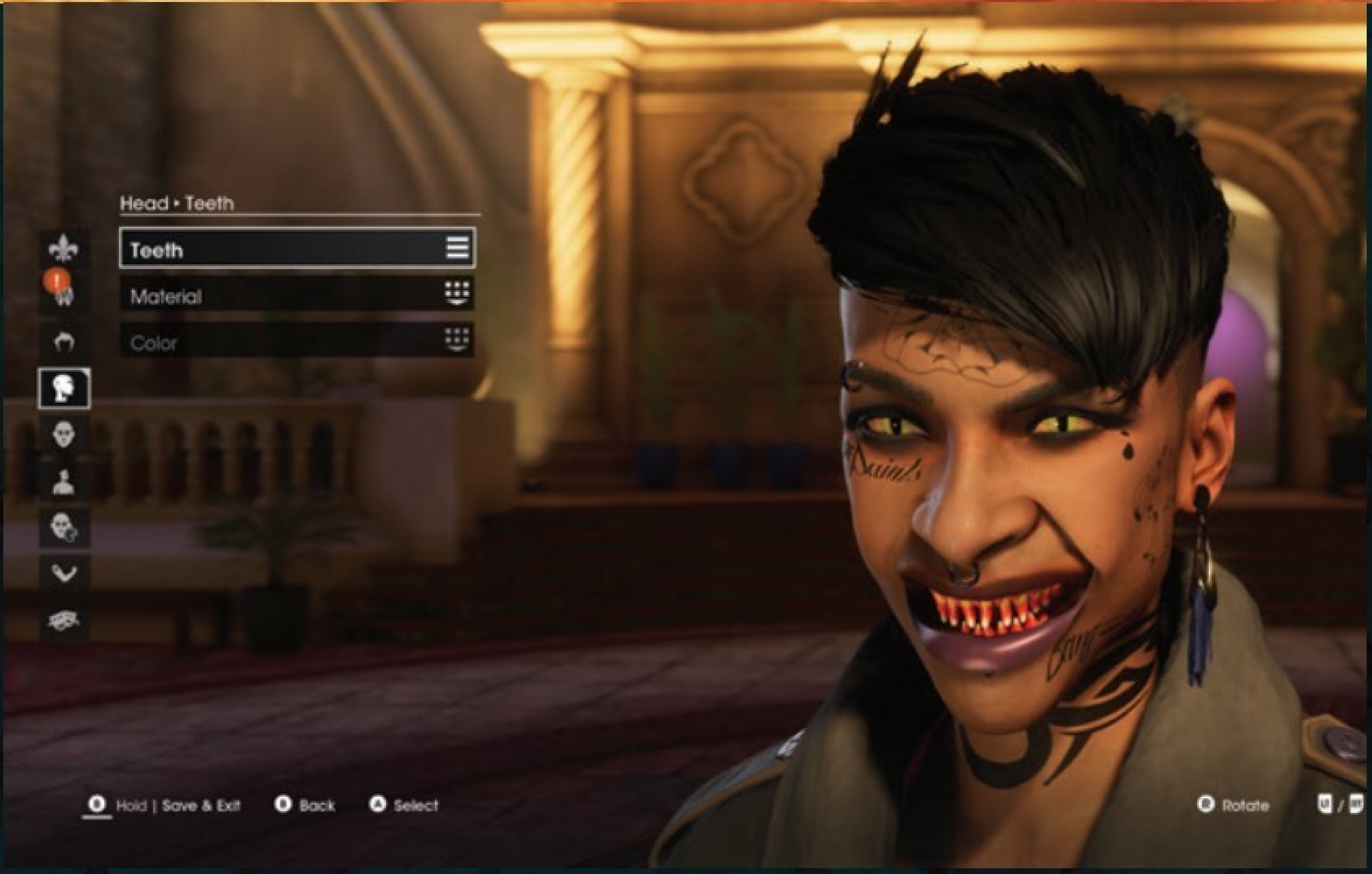
The protagonist is in their office, only shown from the backside for a split second before looking into a mirror. This brings up Saints' elaborate character creator. I try making myself and land on an eerily realistic recreation; the only primary difference is how his voice sounds. The game offers eight voices, which you can freely change at any point, but none are close to mine.

Next, I get into the creator's more refined details – like determining if my nipples show or are digitized when I'm shirtless. I also adjust the size of my groin – an awkward moment in the presence of the game's developers.

After finalizing my look, that big spoiler hits, and it's as shocking as Loftus billed. Following the impact, time in Santa Ileso rewinds to show how the Saints got to this point. I find myself in blue and white combat fatigues, working for an organization called the Marshall Defense Industries. This military group's leader is a cowboy named Atticus Marshall, who wears a white coat and white Stetson matching his white mustache and eyebrows. Around his waist is a sizable belt bucket with a star on it. He screams of everything Texas.

And so begins my time with Saints Row.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Deep Silver **DEVELOPER** Volition **RELEASE** August 23



Marshall Law

I'm a new Marshall recruit, aiming to make the world a better place through a bit of T.L.C.: Technologically advanced weapons, Loose morals, and a Culture of conflict. My first Marshall mission is with a sizable squad of a dozen-plus people wearing the same gear I am. I get to know a few of them through another nicely animated sequence boasting sharp writing and the Saints Row humor we've come to expect. We're storming a "historic location" called the Silver Gulch, which appears to be a tourist trap showing what the Wild West was once like. We're here to apprehend someone named The Nahualli. All I know is his name.

Within seconds of controlling my character, he's rocked by an explosion and thrown to the ground. A six-wheel transport explodes in front of him. Fire is everywhere. Blue flares littered across the dirt illuminate the scene with unusual beauty. Bullets rip overhead and more explosions rock the horizon. The chaos draws me in, but I can't help but notice that there's an old-gen feel to my character's movements, how the enemies move in front of me, and the general levels of detail in the world, texture, and lighting. Saints Row has the appearance of a slightly enhanced last-gen holdover.

As I run forward into a hail of gunfire, bodies ragdoll around, and explosions continue. The Nahualli's troops are decked out in red and black military fatigues and carry a variety of assault rifles and explosives. I light up over a dozen of them, and flicking up on the analog stick allows for quick headshots if I get the timing right. I use a machine gun for groups and the pistol for more precision with longer-range targets – both feel okay but don't pack much punch.

The gunplay is satisfying in how easy it is to locate and hit targets yet lacks the intensity and skill of freely aiming. While I can turn off auto-aim in the options, this scenario has attackers approaching from multiple vectors at once; it forces me to dispatch threats with barely a glance their way. In other words, it's designed well for aim assist. Explosive barrels littered along the dusty roads make my job easier. The chaos of this opening moment is glorious and silly and funnels me through nicely designed set pieces using vehicles and verticality in fun ways.

The war reaches an old-fashioned saloon, with swinging doors on its front and second-story inn rooms for the drunk. I get my first look at The Nahualli, but his troops are too entrenched, and I can't get close to him.

I regroup with my team, and we discuss a plan, but as we converse, he leaps out of a second-story window onto a descending hover ship looking like Tony Stark designed it for The Avengers. He tosses out the pilot and appears to fumble with the controls, giving me enough time to toss a grapple attached to a sizable APC truck onto the hover ship. My aim is true, and the line tightens, but not before Nahualli rockets into the sky. The APC lifts off the ground with little resistance. I leap onto the back of the airborne truck and, much like a scene in an Uncharted game, scale the vehicle's exterior as it soars dangerously through a narrow canyon. I think I'll get control of my character here, but the sequence ends quickly with the NPC hitting a rock bridge and stopping the hover ship dead in its tracks.

My character ascends to the aircraft's wing and lays down as the vessel wobbles to free itself. Enemies emerge from nearby caves, and a shooting gallery-like gameplay sequence plays out. As the ship tries to get away, I'm thrown off its side, thankfully saving myself by grabbing the side of a wing with one hand. I again open fire on enemies in the caves with my other hand. This moment is grand in scale but a bit choppy in execution. Rough transitional animations make the switch between action moments a bit jarring. Enemy AI is also laughably docile, giving me plenty of time to frame them for a shot, even though they have me dead to rights for a good five seconds.

Once the coast is clear, I climb on top of the ship again and meet Nahualli for a fist fight.

"You have more courage than brains," he says with a sneer.

"You're god---- right I do!" I fire back like it's a compliment.

I won't reveal how this conflict ends or where the story goes next, but my following action is working on my character's look for a second time, this time getting the opportunity to select my clothing. I can wear the Marshall gear or dress in civilian attire. I again recreate my look of the day with a gray t-shirt, black jeans, and a matching cap. The well of garment options is deep and should allow players to create some wild designs.

Opening Santa Ileso

The open world is finally available for me to explore, and I hop into a beat-up pickup truck to see what it offers. The vehicle has a loose arcade-like feel, and it can almost turn on a dime, thanks to an overly emphasized powerslide, which racks up experience points every time I use it. The experience system harks back to Saints Row 3 and rewards me for driving dangerously, like into oncoming traffic and narrowly avoiding cars. The world around me is primarily a brown desert, but I can see black smoke and fire spewing from factories on the horizon. A pocket of industrialization is out there, and I'm racing toward it.

To make my drive more relaxing, I scroll through 10 different radio stations and settle on Tumbleweed Radio, which plays classic westerns. The current song consists mainly of soothing whistling. It fits the moment.

I'm following a purple path of arrows to my destination, and as I draw near, I receive a series of calls that introduce me to the game's main cast: Neenah, Eli, and Kev. During my hours playing, these three characters are a constant, and Saints Row's story unfolds through this unified ensemble in a fun way, often slowing to show their chemistry as they hang out together at the gang's apartment.

For the next couple of hours, I continue down the game's critical path, picking away at missions, either with all four characters working together or on my own for the Marshalls. My efforts net me money to spend on weapons and gear, and I also earn valuable experience points that unlock levels and skills. My first unlocked skill is called Pineapple Express, which allows me to grab an enemy, drop a grenade down their pants, and throw them. It's a hell of a way to clear out a group of foes. I later unlock a sticky grenade that I can throw at enemies.

At this point in my story, I'm mainly taking on the Panteros since they occupy most of the surrounding industrialized area. Some missions are as simple as driving to a location and taking out a specific general or robbing a safe. Other assignments deliver sizable action sequences, such as leaping across the hoods of cars as a convoy roars into a sandstorm. In another, I mount a turret on a flatbed truck to mow down motorcycles giving chase. The missions offer plenty of variety in these early moments, and the banter from the ensemble and adversaries delivers ample humor and insight into the developing story.

After a few hours, my group of friends realizes they are great at what they do and should start their own criminal empire. Eli knows how to start this business. Kev knows how to draw the proper attention to it. Neenah is the best driver around. And my player character calls himself a "walking murder party." The gang of four is actually five: They have a cat named Snickerdoodle, almost always up to no good in cutscenes.

With the team unified, I can now call upon my allies to help me mid-mission – all I have to do is bring out my phone, dial them up, and one will be there to assist me in their unique ways.

Cooperative Hijinks

The next step in building our empire is finding a place to set up headquarters. Before beginning, however, I'm alerted that someone has joined my game. Chris Donley, Volition's lead project manager, jumped in to show me how cooperative play works. He tells me the entire game – all the missions and side activities – are designed with two players in mind.

His presence also brings a new icon to my HUD: The prank meter, which invites me to complete a unique challenge Chris can't see. All I have to do is drive into an oncoming lane 20 times, and I can supposedly play a prank on Chris. I have no idea what will happen, but I'm excited to see what it is.

Rather than taking on the next story mission, Chris and I dive into some of the game's side content. All the while, I'm working on that prank meter. One of our first stops is an activity called Wingsuit Saboteur.

After talking to a mission giver in a train car, we find ourselves hundreds of feet in the air in a helicopter. We leap out together and open our wingsuits to glide along the rooftops of a factory. We're looking for satellite dishes we must destroy within a set amount of time. The precise wingsuit controls allow the player to dive to gain speed and press L2 to reduce and land. The division is fun and balanced nicely for two players, and we finish with just five seconds on the clock.

I still want to get my prank off, but Chris beats me to the punch. Within the next story mission, as we're mid-battle against a dozen Panteros troops, Chris activates his prank, and a swarm of bees engulfs my character. They buzz about and cover most of my view, annoying for a surprising amount of time, even into the next story cutscene, making for a hilarious sight. When I gain control of my character again – now bee free – Chris departs my game, saying there are "tons of different

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In and out in 20 minutes or less!

pranks to pull on your friends." Most are just visual, like the bees.

One of the following missions brings me to the rundown church where my story began. It's in even worse shape than before and appears to be days away from being leveled. A few bucket loaders sit outside its front doors. I'm not here long before the Panteros' forces show up for a fight. I hop into one of the loaders and manually raise and lower the bucket to smash cars bringing more troops. Most of these vehicles explode under my loader's might, some tumbling hilariously away thanks to the game's slightly unrealistic physics.

When the church's perimeter is secured, it becomes the gang's new base of operations. It's here that I gain access to something called the Criminal Empire table. Sitting on it is a map of Santa Ileso. Scattered across it are well over a dozen vacant lots. I have the choice to construct a building on any of these lots. I select a spot just off Route 66 and can construct one of three structures here for free.

The first choice is a Chalupacabra stand, which opens up an activity to find and steal drug trucks scattered across the city. The second choice is a Bright Future building, allowing me to cheat corporations by dumping their toxic waste illegally. The third option, which I select, is the Shady Oaks Medical Clinic building, giving me a chance to compete in the Insurance Fraud activity. The Criminal Empire component offers players customization over the open world and ensures new activities are hitting periodically. However, not all buildings are free to build, so you will have to earn cash through various means as the game progresses.

One unconventional way to gain money is finding glowing dumpsters. Although loaded with trash, the dumpsters are Saints Row's treasure chests. Dive into one, and you may find a stash of cash, a rare weapon, new clothing, or even a collectible that you can display within the church. You can put statues on pedestals, knickknacks on shelves, and artwork on the walls. You have a big hand in personalizing the look of your home, making the hunt worth the effort. You can also find additional emotes in the dumpsters. You can have two at any time. In my play session, one animation looked exactly like "praise the sun" but is slightly different since it ends in dab. The second emote makes my character repeatedly punch himself in the face. You can use these emotes whenever you want, even when conversing with NPCs.

By the time I finished playing, I was a bit overwhelmed by the vast amount of side content I unlocked. On top of the activities and missions I walked through, I also had the chance to dive into my phone to enter separate Wanted and Threats lists to hunt down specific targets. The latter gave me a boost in venture income. The Wanted targets bring story moments, as do your teammates, which unfold through companion missions.

Saints Row looks like a meaty open-world experience, delivering plenty of variety and enjoyment at almost every turn. The art direction for the world is fantastic, but the details for a new-gen game are lacking, making it look more like a last-gen sequel to Saints Row 3 than a true showpiece for your PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, or PC. That's okay, however. In a market that doesn't offer many games like this anymore, a new Saints Row that plays like the best entry in the series is a damn good thing to see. I left Volition eager to get my hands on more, and I thankfully don't have long to wait, as the game releases on August 23. ■

Reinventin AN IMPROBABLE Success

How Ubisoft revisited the drawing board for Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope

by Marcus Stewart

When Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle leaked online months before its official E3 2017 reveal, fans wrote it off as either a late April Fool's joke or an ill-conceived abomination. The prestigious Mario brand mixing it up with those annoying critters from Rayman? How could anyone think this was a good idea? The attitude shifted, however, once media and influencers got their hands on it.

"As soon as they saw their gameplay, as soon as they started to try the game, basically, they completely changed their mind," says creative director Davide Soliani. "There were people doing six, seven hours of queue just to test the game at E3."

This initial positive reception served as the prelude for the game's well-received launch in August 2017. Kingdom Battle garnered positive reception for its friendly-yet-engaging brand of turn-based strategy, colorful personality, and smart blend of disparate franchises.

The Ubisoft Milan and Paris teams would parlay that success a year later into Donkey Kong Adventure, a substantial expansion that Soliani and producer Xavier Manzanares considered a sequel. DK's foray into strategy expanded upon Kingdom Battle's formula by introducing larger, hub-world style exploration and new mechanics such as the ability to grab and toss enemies. DK Adventure showcased the team's goal to always surprise players and never rest on the laurels of what came before, a philosophy it shares with Nintendo, that laid the groundwork for the next big entry.

"One thing that we need to remember is that Nintendo doesn't accept, or on this brand at least, a direct sequel if it's just a sequel," explains Manzanares. "They want to make sure that things are changed, things are surprising. So we were completely in line."

For Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope, Ubisoft follows through on that promise by returning to the drawing board. It started from scratch, rebuilding everything from the ground up, which included making the game in a new engine. While it would remain a turn-based strategy title, it would rework or outright replace anything from the original that didn't fit the team's vision for a bigger, more dynamic tactics experience with broader mainstream appeal.

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy
PUBLISHER Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Paris, Ubisoft Milan **RELEASE** October 20

A NEW BAND OF HEROES

Story-wise, Sparks of Hope goes cosmic with Mario, Luigi, Peach, and their Rabbid counterparts exploring space. A dark entity known as Cursa has begun taking over various planets, using its malevolence to warp them into twisted versions of themselves. Only our heroes can stop them, but three new allies also join. First up is Rabbid Rosalina, who couldn't be more different from the original; she's bored, disinterested, and frankly "over it," traits the game plays up for humor. If she wasn't strange enough, Bowser also joins your ranks. As Mario's archnemesis, this partnership serves as a means to an end: Cursa has brainwashed Bowser's army, and he wants it back. Lastly, there's Edge, an original Rabbid sporting a punk rock aesthetic, a matching attitude, and a giant sword.

Edge offers an intriguing change of pace given she's a Rabbid that isn't a counterpart of a Mario character. A cloud of mystery surrounds her backstory, and Ubisoft hesitates to share many details about her. Soliani does say that she's "pivotal" to the plot. You'll encounter her at the game's first planet, Beacon Beach, where she'll lend her sword to the team. However, Edge's true intentions are unclear, making it tough to trust her fully. Personality-wise, she lives up to her moniker as a tough-as-nails loner; Soliani describes her as "a female rabbit version of Clint Eastwood."

CHANGING TACTICS

Sparks of Hope's biggest gameplay shift from its predecessor is the absence of grid-based movement. Instead, players freely move Mario and his friends to positions within a given range. In addition to allowing a greater degree of dynamism, Ubisoft hopes this more familiar approach will broaden the game's appeal. Kingdom Battle managed to convert non-strategy fans, and reworking the genre's signature, albeit limiting, element may help ease more tactics-averse players into the title.

But Sparks of Hope remains a turn-based experience valuing strategy first and foremost. You'll still take advantage of cover and vantage points to snuff out opponents or defend from attacks. However, Ubisoft has reworked the party layout so that each hero's role has greater depth. As Soliani describes, the nine heroes fall into three macro archetypes: damage dealers, support, and crowd control/battlefield manipulation. Additionally, each character fills an individual role: Gunslinger (Mario), Brawler (Rabbid Mario), Scout (Luigi), Paladin (Peach), Combat Healer (Rabbid Peach), Blade Master (Edge), Trickster (Rabbid Luigi), and Commander (Bowser).

While Soliani didn't go into detail on each role, Luigi's designation as a Scout makes him adept at long-ranged attacks, while Bowser's Commander role focuses on demolishing swaths of enemies with his trusty "Bowzooka." Rabbid Rosalina can cast a wide-reaching "stasis" effect that immobilizes and disables foes in its radius, and Edge can rip multiple enemies to shreds with one swing. Considering a hero's role and what they contribute to the group gives players several combinations to experiment with thoughtfully. Best of all, Sparks of Hope lets you build the party you want. While Kingdom Battle forced players to have one Nintendo hero and one Rabbid in the party, the sequel allows for any makeup of teammates, whether it's all Rabbids, all Mario allies, and anything between.

The most significant addition to combat are Sparks, Rabbid versions of Super Mario Galaxy's Lumas that play a major role narratively and during gameplay. Equipping these powerful stars to heroes – who can carry a maximum of two Sparks – grants a range of abilities that can either strengthen existing specialties, improve inherent weaknesses, or allow them to perform a variety of special moves. Some Sparks add elemental buffs to attacks such as fire, freeze, or shock. One can pull in nearby enemies while another can push them away from you. Sparks can even unleash spectacular attacks such as causing a meteor shower to rain on the battlefield and obliterate scores of enemies.

Soliani describes Sparks as a "game-changer" due to how wildly they can transform a character and, in turn, the party's strategy. Sparks level up by feeding them star bits, enhancing the powers they grant. You can also upgrade heroes via individual skill trees and unlock new abilities to deepen a character's bag of tricks by spending runes earned by battling and completing missions.

"You can imagine that [these are] the best things that we can offer to a player that really wants to support their own playstyle," says Soliani. "...there are tons of possibilities in this game that will help the player [create] between the shortest or the craziest combo possible in battlegrounds."

EXPLORING A LARGER GALAXY

Regarding exploration, Ubisoft listened to feedback from Kingdom Battle fans who wished they could discover more of the game's picturesque world and actively engage with it.

"We felt that even if it was beautiful going through the planet in Kingdom Battle, we always had this feeling that the player was advancing and forgetting what was behind them," Soliani says.

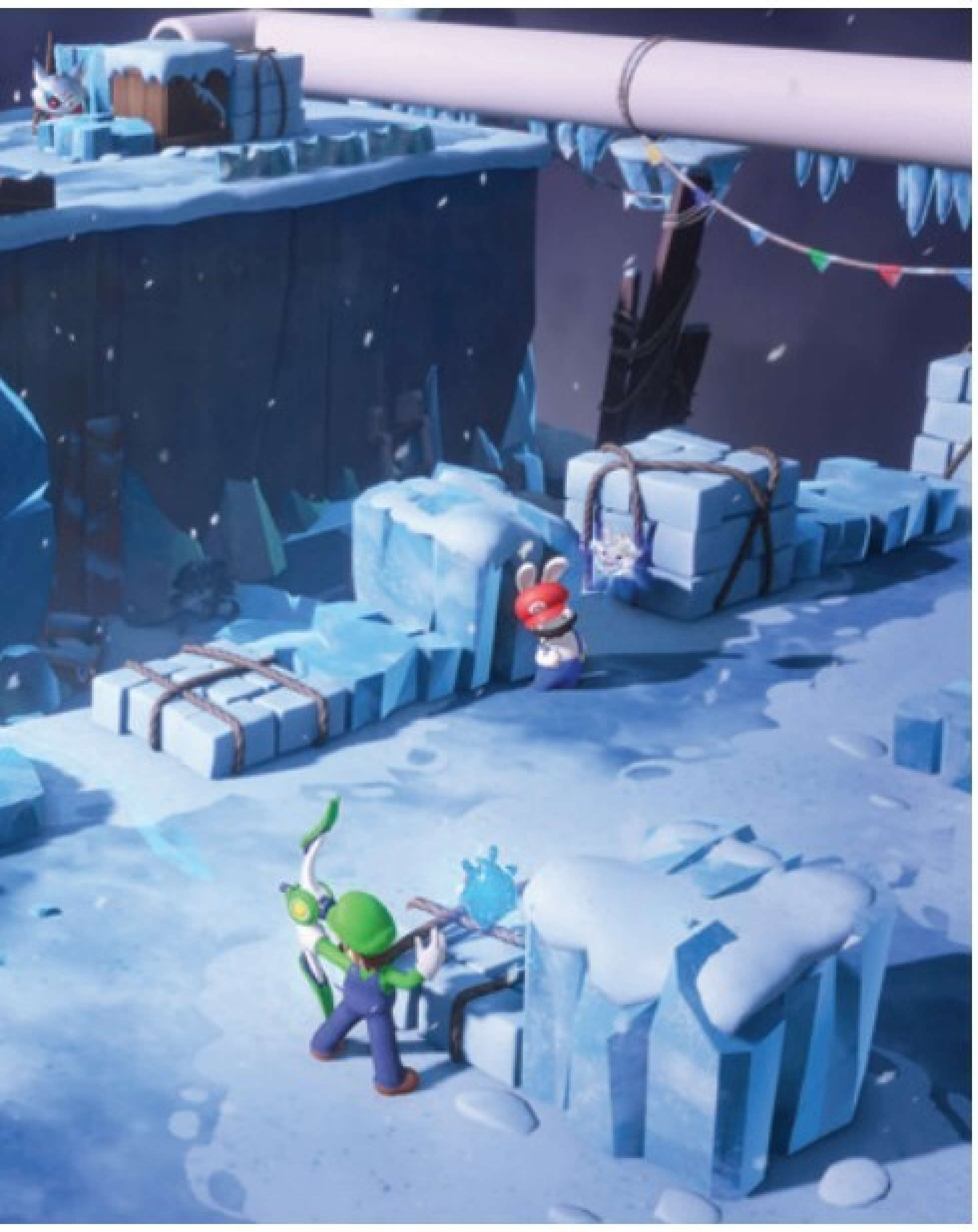
In Sparks of Hope, the team goes all out, creating multiple, large-scale planets players can explore. From a snow-covered ice world to a lush jungle planet, the sequel boasts increased visual variety and numerous activities to engage with outside the main storyline. Each planet has its own self-contained story and inhabitants offering side quests. Ubisoft wants players to feel greater agency in steering their adventure. They can beeline the critical path and indulge in side-content when they see fit.

Additionally, worlds contain environmental puzzles, such as a constellation-based riddle seen in trailers, secret caves, and other hidden areas. Shaking trees drop star bits, and going off the beaten path can lead to discoveries such as new Sparks. Players can even revisit planets to access entire new zones with the help of their robotic companion, Beep-0. Along the way, Beep-0 acquires new skills such as revealing bridges, pushing walls, or moving blocks to bypass obstacles. By adding this replayability to planets, players can spend a ton of time searching every nook and cranny of a world to find every secret or combat encounter.

A NEW SET OF EXPECTATIONS

While Kingdom Battle needed to prove naysayers wrong, Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope must now live up to and, hopefully, surpass the expectations of an excited fanbase. Soliani and Manzanares know there's pressure to deliver, especially now that Mario + Rabbids is a brand and the sequel introduces a number of significant changes. As Soliani states, the team can feed off fan excitement instead of vitriol this time.

"The extreme love that we received from the community, and the relationship that we built with them in those years just after the release, I believe that it's the fuel that drives us to do Sparks of Hope every single day." ■



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THE SUMM 60

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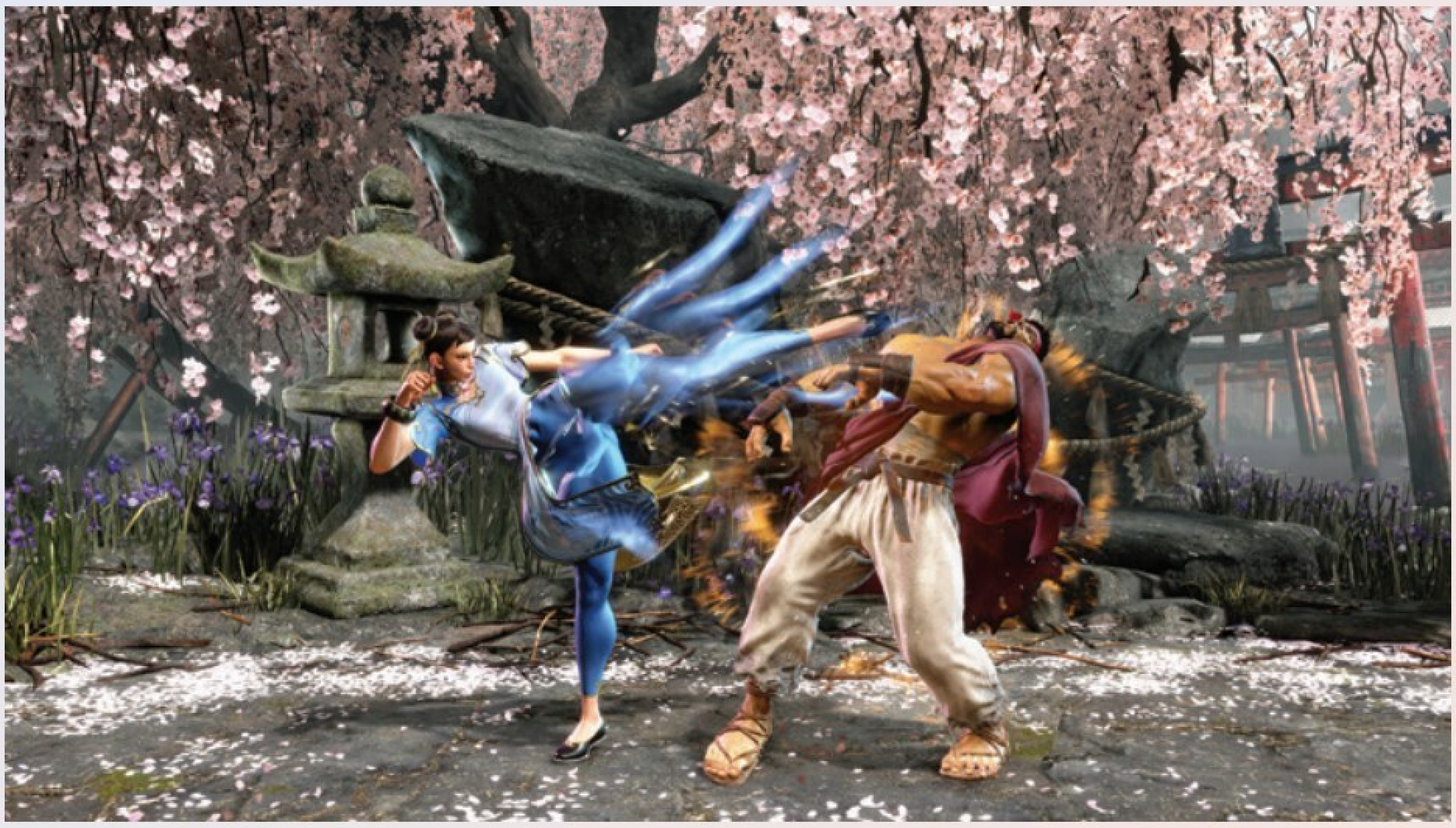
This year may not have had an E3 convention, but the game industry had no shortage of big new announcements and reveals to share in individual press conferences. Across massive events like the Summer Game Fest or in playable form through celebrations like Steam Next Fest, we learned of an exciting stretch of games coming in the months ahead.

We've selected 60 projects we're most excited about, reflecting a tremendous diversity of genres, platforms, and development teams. These are the games set to define the next year or more, and we can't wait to see how they all come together.

BY GAME INFORMER STAFF



STREET FIGHTER 6

Commentated combat

Capcom's reveal of Street Fighter 6 after this year's Pro Tour set the table for the next entry in perhaps the most beloved fighting franchise of all time. Following meager offerings at launch, Street Fighter V rebounded and gave fans a ton of features, fighters, and content by the end of its lifecycle. Street Fighter 6 hopes to avoid those initial stumbles by including various modes of play from the get-go, but my hands-on time was all about seeing how matches play out.

The core gameplay is rock solid from the three matches I experienced, but I'm perhaps most intrigued by the real-time commentary. This feature, provided by recognizable members of the fighting game community, is such a smart evolution of the genre; after all, sports games have had real-time commentary for decades, and esports have become a huge part of the fighting-game community.

During my demo, I could choose between two play-by-play analysts: Jeremy "Vicious" Lopez and Aru. Vicious provides dynamic commentary in English, while Aru is there for players who want Japanese analysis. Before entering a match, you're able to select a play-by-play personality, as well as a color commentator. I can't wait to see the final roster of analysts and how they match up to complement one another. Unfortunately, no color commentators were in the build I played, leaving my play-by-play guy to take on the daunting task of going it solo.

After choosing Vicious' English commentary, I selected from two stages and four characters (Ryu, Chun-Li, Jamie, and Luke). While loading into the fight, you can use the four d-pad directions to choose which face you want your character to make. Even though the face of determination always looks good on Ryu, I opted for fierce gritted teeth (you can change the face as many times as you'd like until the match loads, leading to some hilarious face-contortion). Once you're in, combatants enter the arena with unique walkout animations and even a screen showcasing their vital stats and interests outside of fighting.

The matches play out familiarly, with Hadoukens and rising uppercuts flying about. The one-person commentary booth does an apt job keeping up with the action. During my playtime, Vicious recognized and called out things like using projectiles to feel each other out, overly aggressive actions, and even when a character was cornered and taking on a lot of damage. I also appreciated how the commentator didn't just react to special attacks or situations; when I ended a match on a basic low kick, Vicious remarked how I threw a kick "out of nowhere" that my opponent didn't expect. At the same time, the tension ratcheted up once he made it known we both had our supers ready.

The commentary is a great feature to help evolve the series and the genre, but make no mistake: The gameplay is equally as impressive, particularly with its simplified control scheme option. I loved taking control of Ryu as I fought Chun-Li and took on the new challenger, Jamie. Jamie's Chinese drunken-fist style provides a unique puzzle to solve, but thanks to my familiarity with Ryu, I didn't have too much trouble. I also enjoyed experimenting with Luke's high-energy, fast-projectile style.

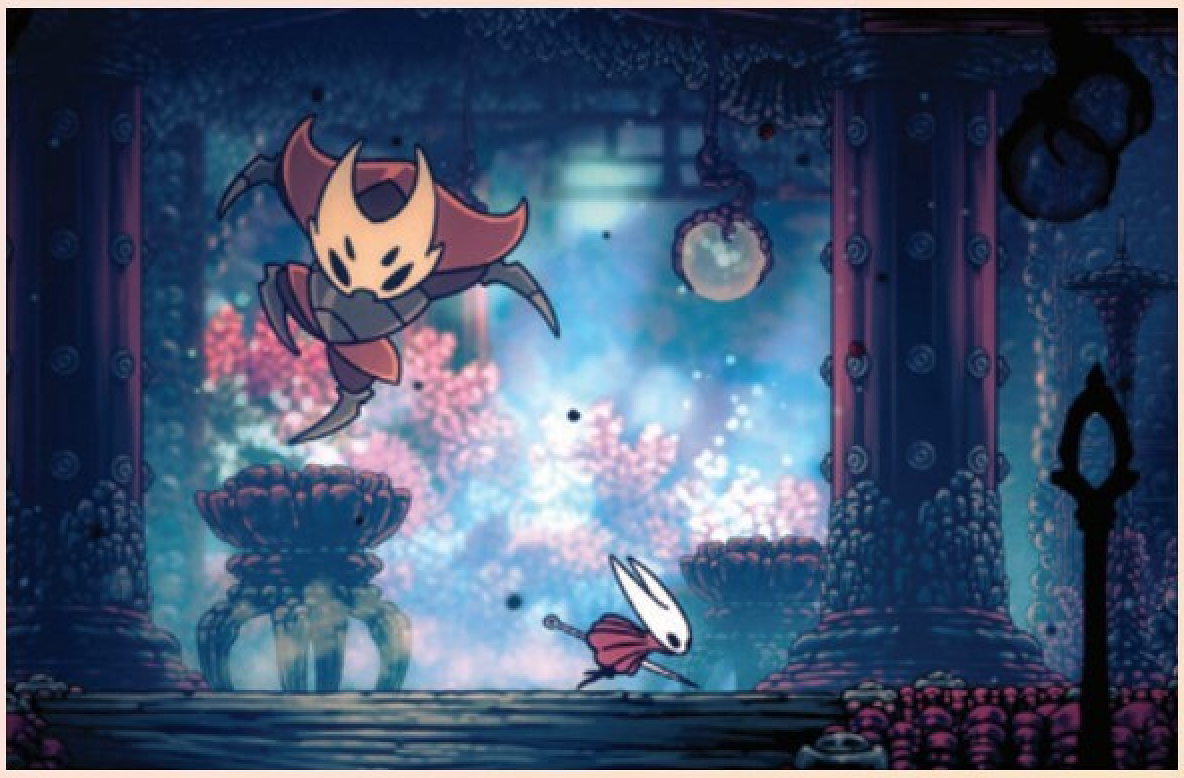
Street Fighter 6 is making all the right moves so far. Thanks to years of repetitive analysis in annual sports titles, I was a little hesitant going in. But my hands-on (and ears-on) time gave me confidence that the dynamic, two-person commentary booth might be able to provide not only the atmosphere of a match but also expand my knowledge of Street Fighter tactics in general. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

♥ ♥ ♥ ♡ ♡

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Capcom
DEVELOPER Capcom **RELEASE** 2023

HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG

Jumping to new platforms



If you don't know why so many people are excited about another Hollow Knight, go back and explore that remarkable game. Inspired by Metroid and Dark Souls, the original Hollow Knight provides incredibly precise platforming, equally tight combat, and a fascinating world of anthropomorphic bugs in a rich fantasy mythology.

The sequel, Hollow Knight: Silksong, was first announced in 2019 and was even playable at E3 that year. Even then, the game looked and played great when I demoed it. But since then, the project has had long stretches filled with little to no new details. But recent reveals should give Xbox players cause to celebrate, as we've recently learned the game is coming to Xbox Series X/S and Game Pass on day one.

Silksong focuses on the character Hornet, a boss and prominent NPC in the first Hollow Knight. After being captured and taken to a distant kingdom, the fast-moving, needle-wielding warrior princess must ascend through a strange mix of lands to uncover the threat overwhelming the place.

Acrobatic combat and high-speed navigation return, not to mention a wide variety of enemies; the developers are touting 150 new foes. The latest gameplay shows several scripted platforming sequences through collapsing or danger-filled caverns. Hornet is constantly, and quickly, pogoing off or around opponents to gain advantageous positioning. We see her using an impressive array of tools and traps, like caltrops or a drilling screw-down attack.

It's been hard to wait for the release, but Silksong looks strong in its latest appearance. New platform options for Xbox players should be good news for everyone; more players deserve a chance to experience this enchanting, challenging series. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Team Cherry
DEVELOPER Team Cherry **RELEASE** TBA

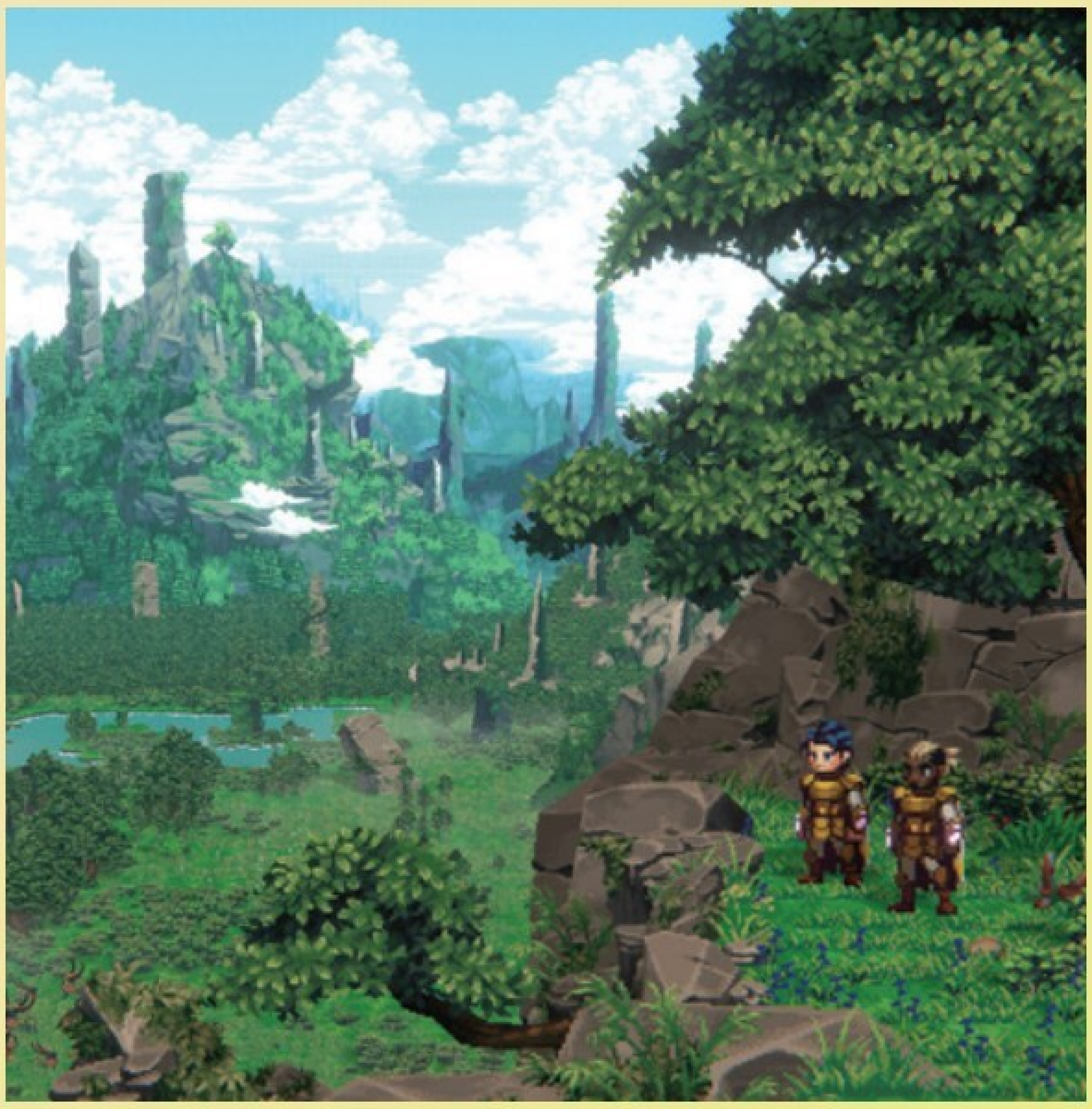
SACRIFIRE

Fired up

SacriFire, reminiscent of '90s classics like Chrono Trigger and Final Fantasy VI, is developer Pixelated Milk's homage to the iconic JRPGs that "began our love affair with gaming." Underground metropolises enhanced by ancient technology and mystical forests home to demons are the primary explorable zones, augmented by hand-drawn character sprites and 3D-modeled environments.

SacriFire's combat merges real-time and turn-based systems, allowing the player to dodge incoming blows and counter using magical armaments of their own. Bring party members along for the epic ride and target enemy weak spots together. Engagements are stunning to behold, with holographic shields, hammers, crossbows, fists, chakrams, spears, and swords that can be chained to unleash deadly, electrifying combos. Moreover, as a JRPG-inspired experience, players should expect to master fighting disciplines, craft weapons, solve puzzles, and traverse perilous dungeons.

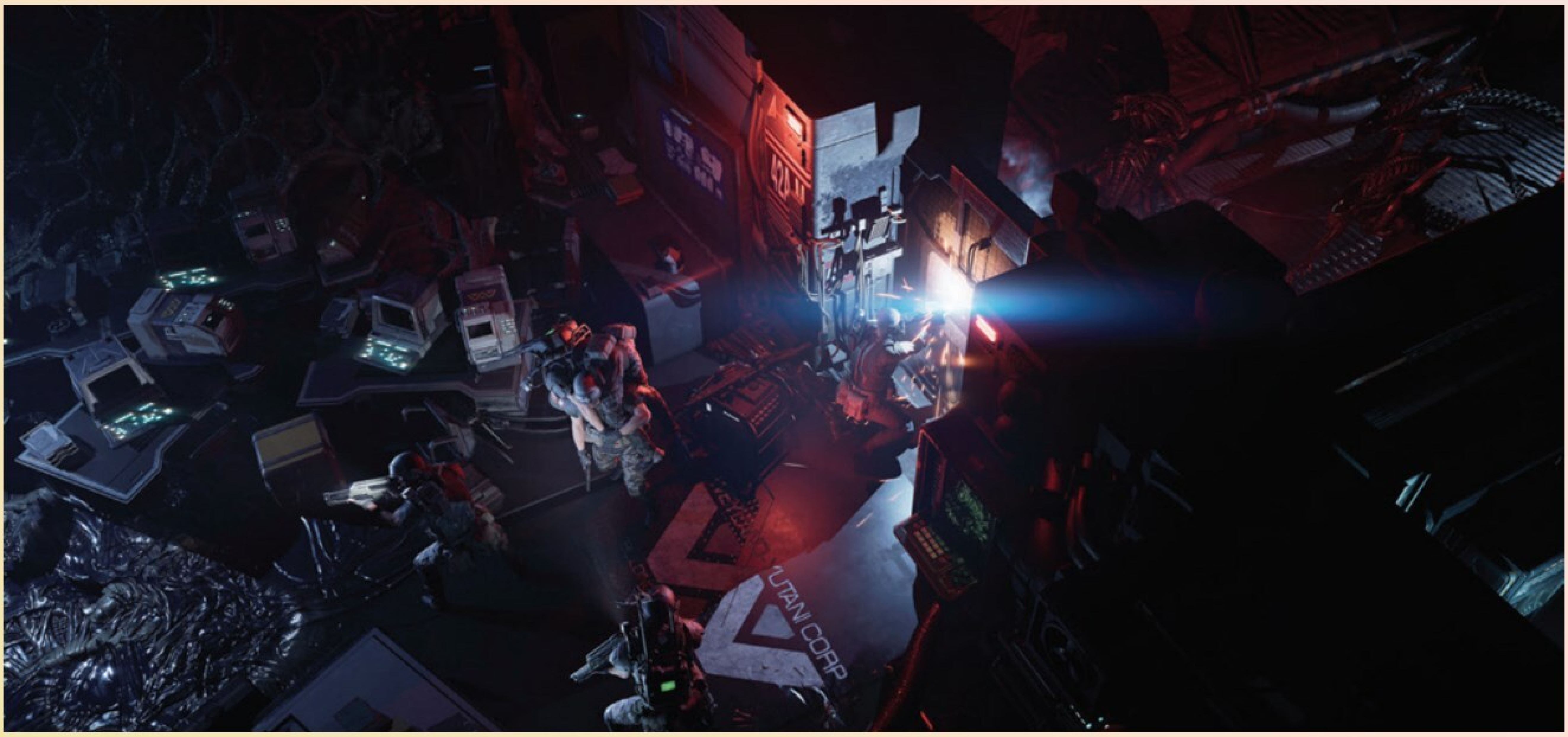
Narrative details are mostly unclear, but young soldier Ezekiel is the playable protagonist. He's joined by a cast of eccentric warriors and nobles who unintentionally find themselves amid an ancient struggle threatening the foundation of SacriFire's world. Legendary composer Motoi Sakuraba of Tales, Golden Sun, and Dark Souls fame lent his talents to the soundtrack, imbuing Ezekiel and co.'s journey with the same whimsical quality we've come to expect of the genre. SacriFire releases in 2023 on PC with plans for a console launch sometime after. **BY JASON GUISAO**



PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Pixelated Milk
DEVELOPER Pixelated Milk **RELEASE** 2023

ALIENS: DARK DESCENT

Permadeath in the face of the universe's greatest threat



A widespread debate among Xenomorph fans is picking the better movie: *Alien* or *Aliens*? The former delivers the suspense of being hunted, while the latter provides the thrill of battle. In the video game realm, Alien: Isolation does a fantastic job replicating the tension of being trapped in tight quarters with a relentless killing machine. We're still looking for that great game counterpart that shows humanity's fight against these monsters. That could come from Aliens: Dark Descent, a new single-player, squad-based experience from developer Tindalos Interactive and publisher Focus Entertainment.

A Xenomorph outbreak rips through a research facility on the moon Lethe, and the Colonial Marines are on the way to quell it. What they quickly find, however, is that rogue operatives from the Weyland-Yutani Corporation also have an interest in the facility and are taking up arms to keep something secret.

Much like Firaxis' XCOM series, you play the role of commander and must issue orders to each of the Colonial Marines. Should you falter in your orders and lead your troops into harm's way, you better hope they have the firepower to survive; once they meet the reaper, they won't return. As each trooper levels up and gains additional perks, the game's permadeath design becomes more painful.

You won't know what dangers await you in the sprawling facility, but you will be able to uncover shortcuts and secrets that aid your cause. You'll have to weigh which classes to bring and what type of armor and abilities may be needed. After each successful outing, you retreat to a base to research new tech, get well-needed rest, and make your squad more powerful through upgrades.

One lowly Xenomorph that drops out of a vent can spell disaster for your squad, and you'll need to act quickly when you come across eggs, as Facehuggers will soon be looking for hosts. You'll also come across Praetorians and Alien Queens (yes, more than one). In some missions, human adversaries will be firing back at you. Tindalos Interactive also teases a new threat that will be unique to this Alien story. The game's debut trailer gives us a brief look at what this adversary may be. We see humanoid beings with glowing blue eyes, android-like wiring over their bodies, and luminous power sources jetting out of their backs.

Aliens: Dark Descent doesn't yet have a release date but is slated to release at some point in 2023 for PlayStation and Xbox consoles and PC. **BY ANDREW REINER**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Strategy **PUBLISHER** Focus Entertainment
DEVELOPER Tindalos Interactive **RELEASE** 2023

THE ALTERS

Cosmic multiplicity

Developer 11 Bit Studios, the team behind This War of Mine, Frostpunk, and Children of Morta, is making something new and a bit more surreal than its previous projects. The Alters takes players on a sci-fi adventure following one man's attempt to survive a desperate situation in outer space. His mission has gone horribly wrong, but he finds all the help he needs to get home within himself. Or rather, him-selves.

Jan Dolski, the main character of this space odyssey, turns to The Alters, alternate versions of himself differing in critical ways that will help them all survive. Each Alter has different skills and character traits, so even though they may all look like Jan, every individual fills specific roles in the mission to get Jan home. The debut trailer shows their ship cruising not far above the surface of a barren planet. Their craft is abnormal and far from the sleek, aerodynamic ship you'd expect to take on an interstellar journey. Instead, it's a giant wheel-like structure with a series of shipping container units fashioned together to form a livable and workable facility at the center.

11 Bit Studios' lead artist Tomasz Kisilewicz says The Alters has aspects of a psychological thriller, with a dash of horror, but it also obviously deals with surrealism. He says this lands in the realm of a "classic sci-fi" story by anchoring to a relatable topic and applying fictional scientific solutions, such as creating alternate selves. Despite its classic narrative design, the gameplay is contemporary, focusing on system design and non-linear gameplay. According to Kisilewicz, it's designed for players to create their own stories. **BY JOHN CARSON**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** 11 Bit Studios
DEVELOPER 11 Bit Studios **RELEASE** TBA

TIME FLIES

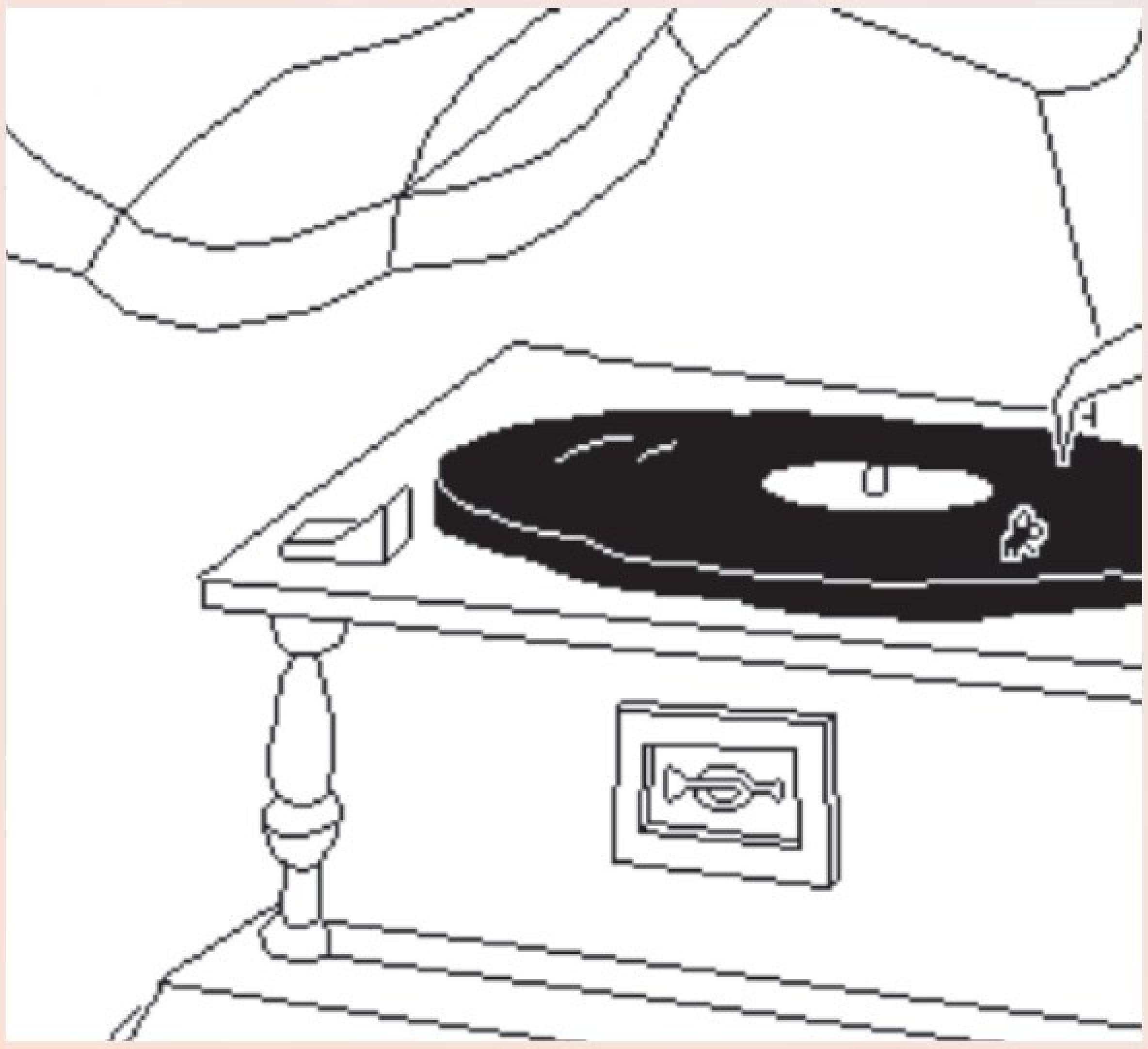
Creating an existential buzz

If you enjoy speed-running puzzle games like Minit, don't let Time Flies pass you by. Players assume the role of a tiny house fly who must complete a personal bucket list of goals. The only problem: your life is short. About a minute on average, if you're lucky.

In a strange feature, you begin the game by selecting a country. Doing so determines your lifespan; choosing the United States grants 73 seconds of existence, but picking Switzerland improves your odds to 83 seconds. Time Flies doesn't tell you the time each nation allots, so you can either stick with your home country or choose one randomly and see what happens.

You spend your precious seconds solving environmental puzzles based on your cryptic checklist. What does "Go on a Tour" mean exactly? That's where you'll have to experiment and get creative. Finding the answers involves drifting from room to room and tinkering with the environment to see what you can interact with. Maybe you can surf a spinning vinyl, watch TV, get drunk, or strum a guitar with your speck of a body. Whatever you do, do it quickly because perishing resets your progress. Thus, Time Flies' challenge comes in finding solutions and executing them as quickly and efficiently as possible. Can you have the time of your life within the time of your life?

Time Flies has an infectious formula, and I couldn't wait to start another run. The amusing premise carries a poignant message that we're all going to die, and our time can come sooner than we realize. How much would you try to accomplish if you knew how long you had left in this world? See for yourself when Time Flies flutters onto PlayStation consoles, Switch, and PC sometime in 2023. **BY MARCUS STEWART**



PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Playables
DEVELOPER Michael Frei and Raphaël Munoz **RELEASE** 2023

DIABLO IV

Darkness on the horizon

With a new World of Warcraft expansion on the way and Overwatch 2 ramping into its early access release, I wasn't expecting to hear much about Diablo IV outside of the quarterly developer blogs. To my astonishment, Rod Fergusson, general manager of the Diablo franchise at Blizzard Entertainment, took center stage during the Xbox and Bethesda showcase in June. He announced that not only was Diablo IV going to make a big impression at the show, but could potentially release in the first half of 2023.

This new look included the reveal of the fifth and final class, the ever-popular Necromancer. Joining the existing roles of Druid, Sorcerer, Rogue, and Barbarian, these sculptors of death use every part of flesh it tears to create even more chaos in the lands of Sanctuary. No matter the chosen class specialization, the Necromancer can use *The Book of the Dead* to summon skeleton warriors, mages, and golems to do their dark bidding. Players can customize these minions even further with three specializations each, offering plenty of ways to support their spells and playstyles.

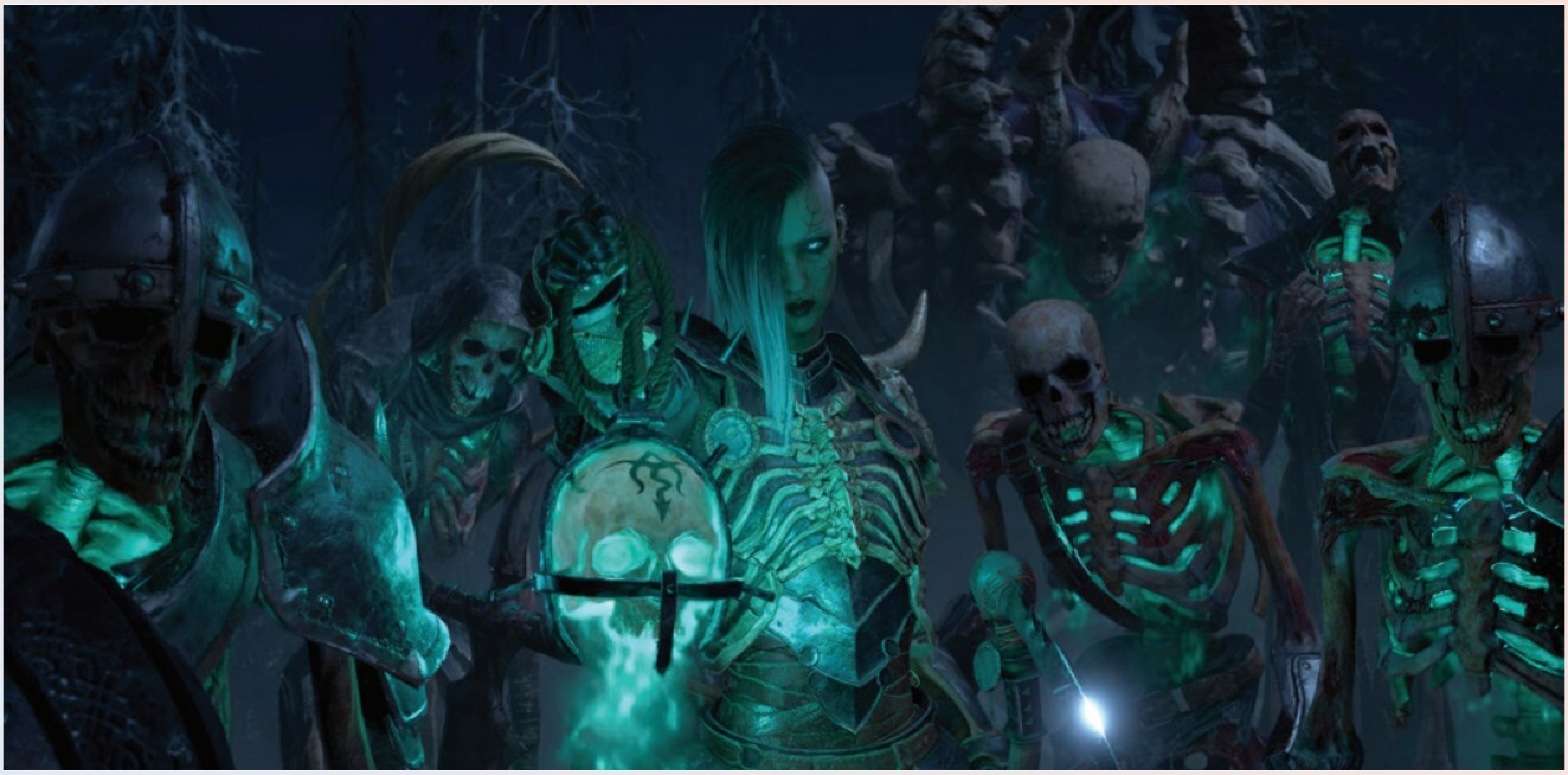
A Necromancer can specialize in four different schools of skills: Blood, Bone, Darkness, and the Army. Utilizing Blood magic spews the crimson liquid in giant, roiling waves or explodes corpses littering the ground. Bone spells create barriers that trap enemies or shoot skeletal splinters. Darkness skills deal death with decay and withering, while the Army specialization uses the risen hordes you summon to your side. The Necromancer hasn't had such a diverse lineup of talents since Diablo II, and it will be intriguing to see how they mix and match to develop the class' grisly brand of destruction.

Unlike the pure-cooperative play in Diablo III, Diablo IV's open world is not only full of endless demonic creatures but other players – and they pose a huge threat. You can wage PvP wars when running around the various zones of Sanctuary. Repeatedly winning skirmishes not only grants riches but also infamy when a champion's location is marked on other players' maps, creating an incentive to spill their blood for additional loot.

But it's not all cutthroat antics, as world bosses bring the disparate humans together to take down massive beasts for glory and prizes. A newly revealed encounter centers on a scaled behemoth with curved, gilded horns and a locked treasure chest chained to the stump where its arm once hung. It uses that heavy gold-filled box as a flail and whips it around with reckless abandon, bulldozing anything in its unstoppable path. To make matters worse, this monstrosity can open portals to pop around the arena, causing its lumbering frame to appear where you'd least want it to. These fights look impressive and intricate compared to past Diablo bosses, and I can't wait to see more.

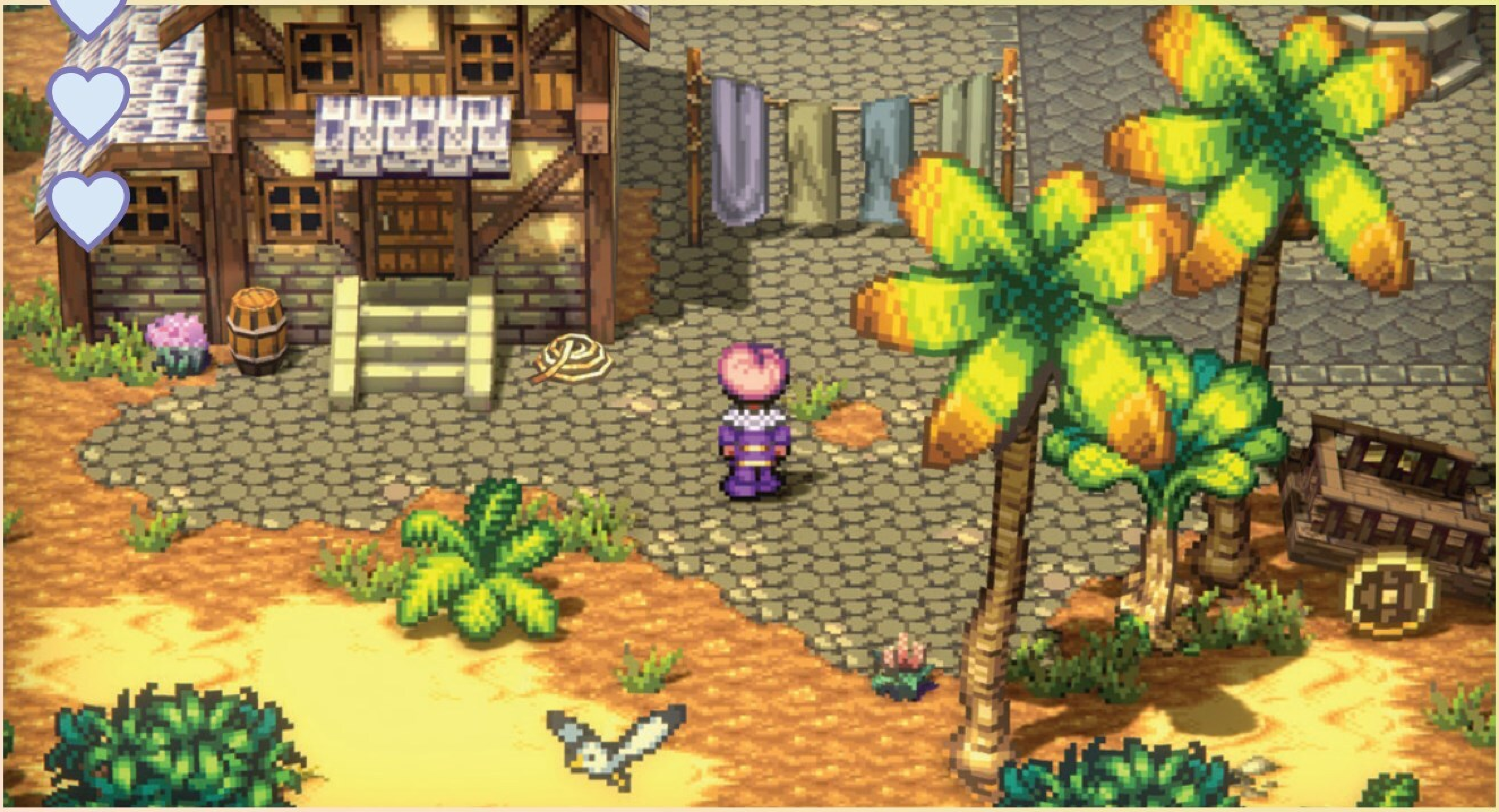
With the absorption of Activision Blizzard into Microsoft likely to conclude in the next year, Xbox has Diablo IV in line with the other first parties in its 2023 release slate. Whether it hits the pre-June launch is something I'm not holding my breath for at this point. Although it's surely a good sign we'll be able to take on the forces of Lilith, mother of the Nephalem, before too long. **BY JOHN CARSON**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE Online Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Activision Blizzard
DEVELOPER Blizzard Entertainment **RELEASE** 2023



ALTERIUM SHIFT

Shifting into high gear



Alterium Shift's vibrant 2.5D world, evergreen fantasy aesthetic, and magical narrative might remind players of classic Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest games. The formula is familiar: embark on an emotional odyssey filled with colorful personalities and vile creatures with dangerous caverns and quaint towns scattered between. Indie developers Drass_Ray and Mottzy aren't trying to reinvent the wheel. Instead, the two are looking to bring the golden age of SNES JRPGs back, and their latest passion project might be the great blast to the past old-school players want.

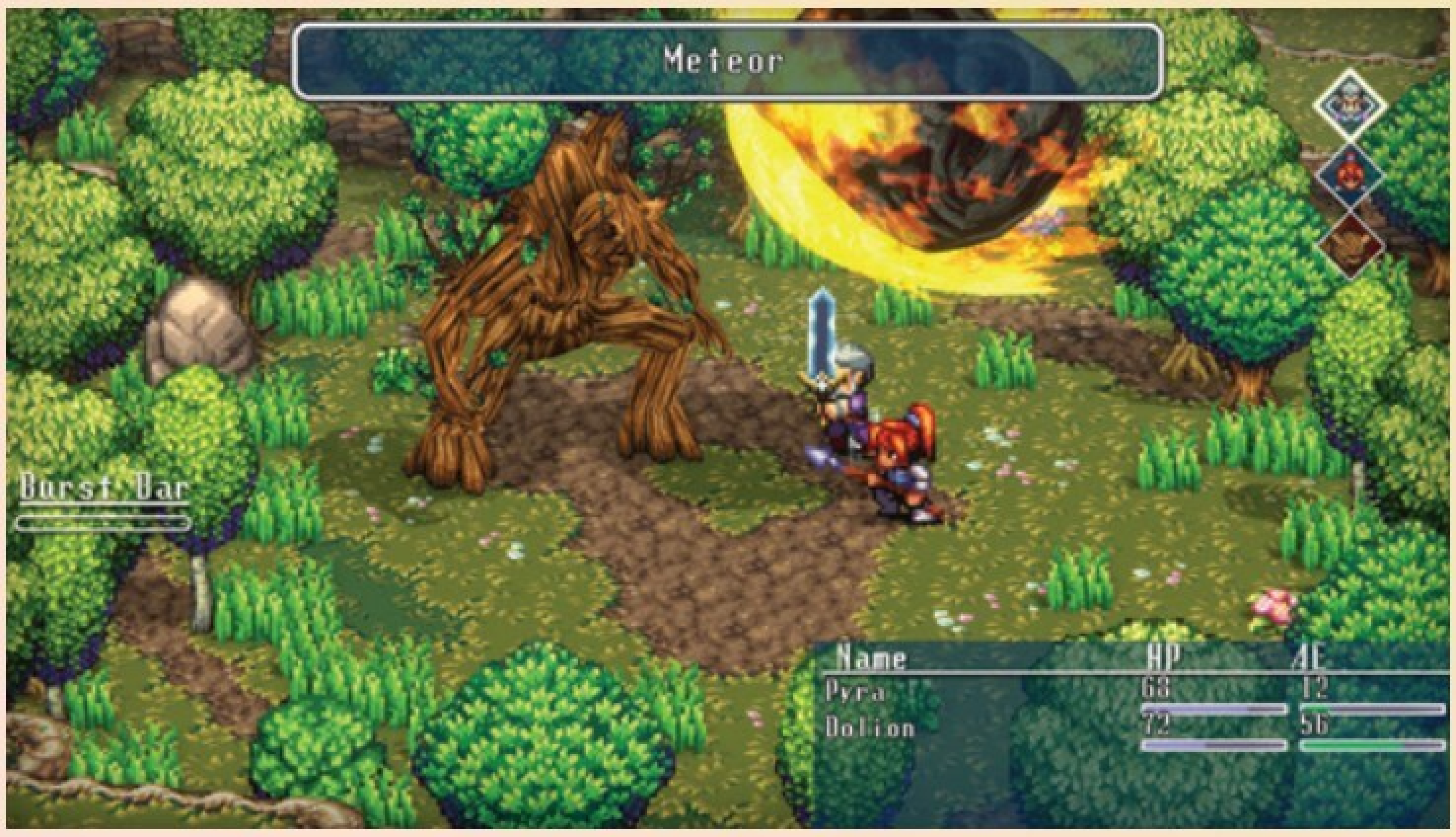
Alterium Shift's world feels alive – gentle breezes rustle tree leaves, ripples run along the surface of deep waters, and strong winds kick up sand. However, none of these design choices compromise the pixel art and traditional box UI. Alterium Shift smartly balances its iconic inspirations with a more modern and sleek vibrancy. From sprinting to sword swipes, animations are fluid and contribute to the game's contemporary feel.

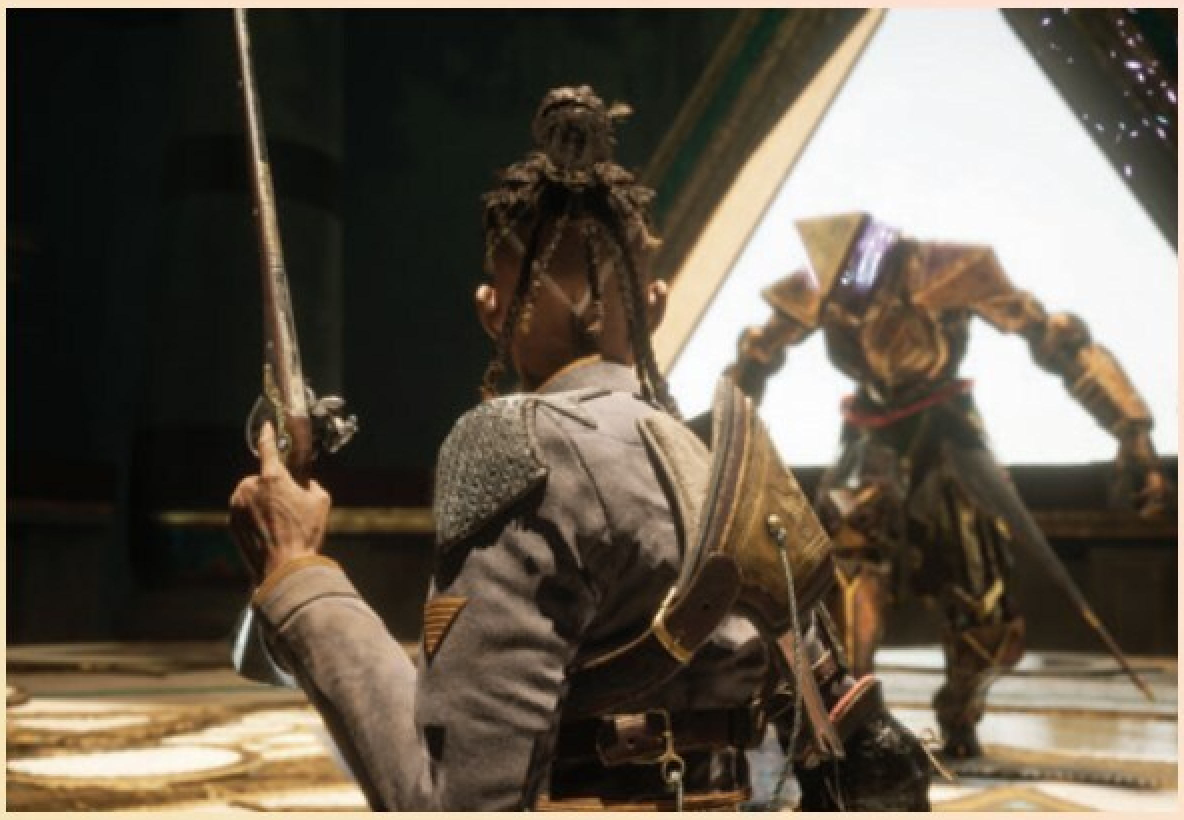
The narrative has the same depth as Alterium Shift's visuals and chronicles the escapades of three heroes in training. Pyra fills the role of a loyal leader with a spear. Atlas is a nimble, reserved archer. And confident Sage is a weaver of Alterium Essence (magic). At the start of the game, we find the three playable characters taking their final test before setting out on the most important mission of their lives. Each walks a different path, filled with interesting NPCs, several biomes, hidden treasures, and new questlines. But, as you'd expect, monsters and ruffians await beyond the peaceful starting village.

Alterium Shift boasts a turn-based combat system. Players use enemy weaknesses to claim victory and gain experience points which make individual characters more powerful – it's the kind of JRPG loop we all know and love. Mix and match attacks, skills, essence, and guards to surmount any challenge, be it gigantic tree monster or lowly grassland snake.

Alterium Shift is coming to PC and unspecified consoles this holiday season. **BY JASON GUISAO**

PLATFORM Consoles (TBA) • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Gravity Game Arise Co., Ltd. **DEVELOPER** Drass_Ray, Mottzy **RELEASE** December 1





FLINTLOCK: THE SIEGE OF DAWN

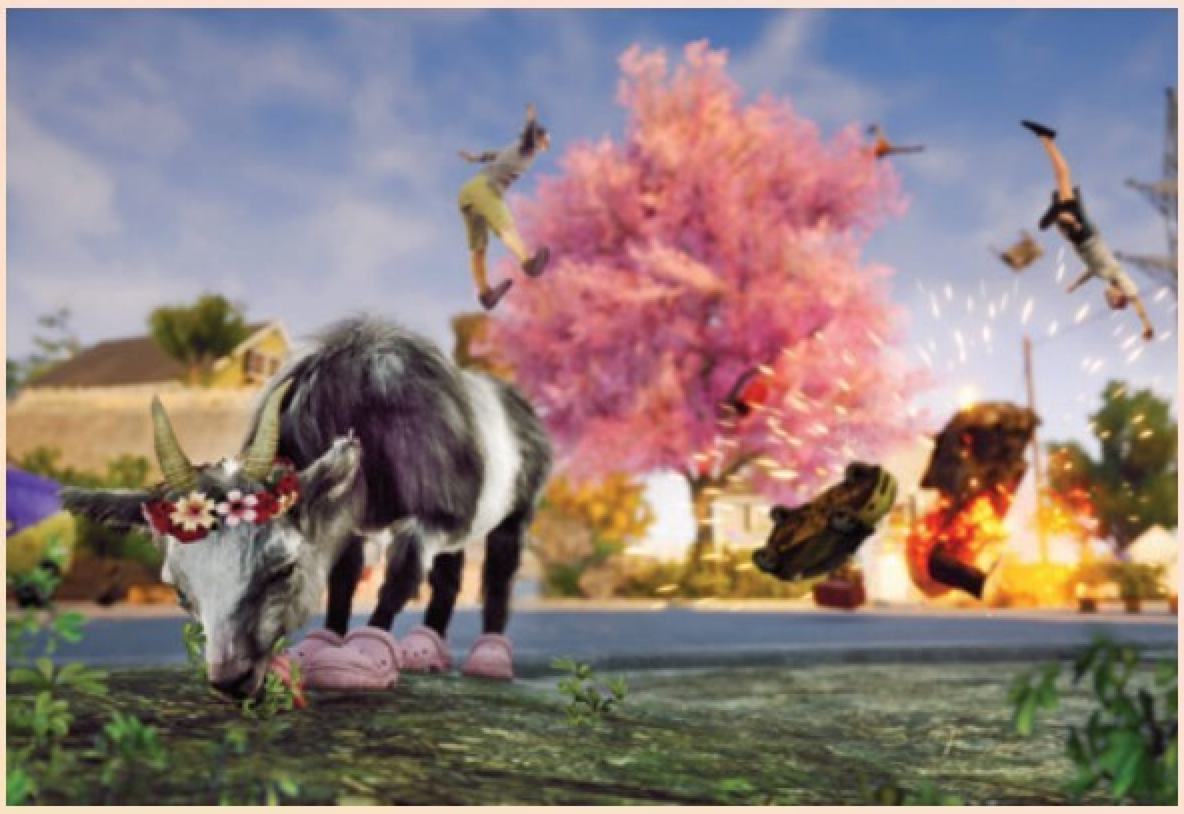
Nor Vanek and her fox-like companion, Enki, are on the warpath of vengeance, slaying gods and lesser creatures alike with rifles, axes, and mystical spells. The battle to rid the world of a new, festering evil will take players across a massive sandbox – from highlands to deserts – teeming with the undead, spiders, and more. **BY JASON GUISAO**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Kepler Interactive **DEVELOPER** A44 **RELEASE** 2023

GOAT SIMULATOR 3

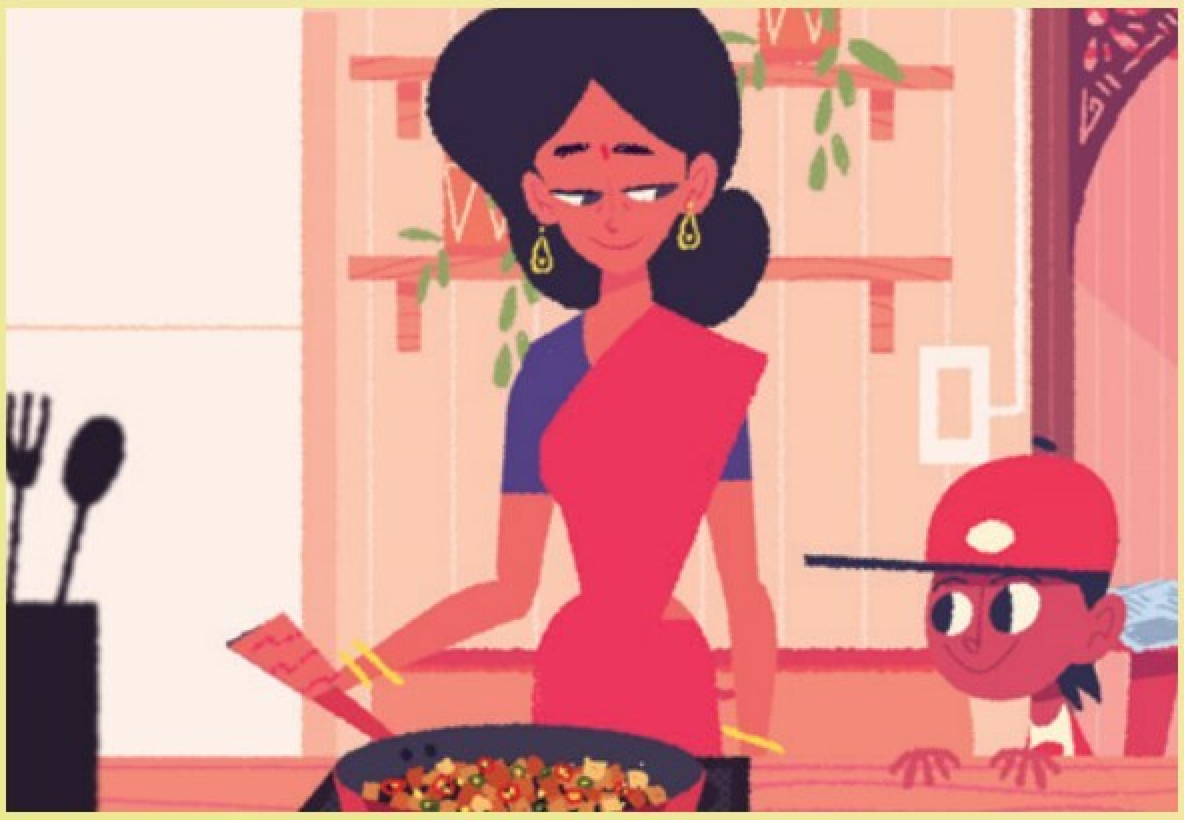
Yes, this is actually the second game, but the title embodies the goofy fun of Goat Simulator. This time, you and a herd of up to three friends engage in wacky goat-themed shenanigans with new challenges, events, and locations. Goat Simulator 3 somehow looks even more ridiculous than the first game, and we wouldn't have it any other way. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Simulation **PUBLISHER** Coffee Stain Publishing
DEVELOPER Coffee Stain North **RELEASE** 2022



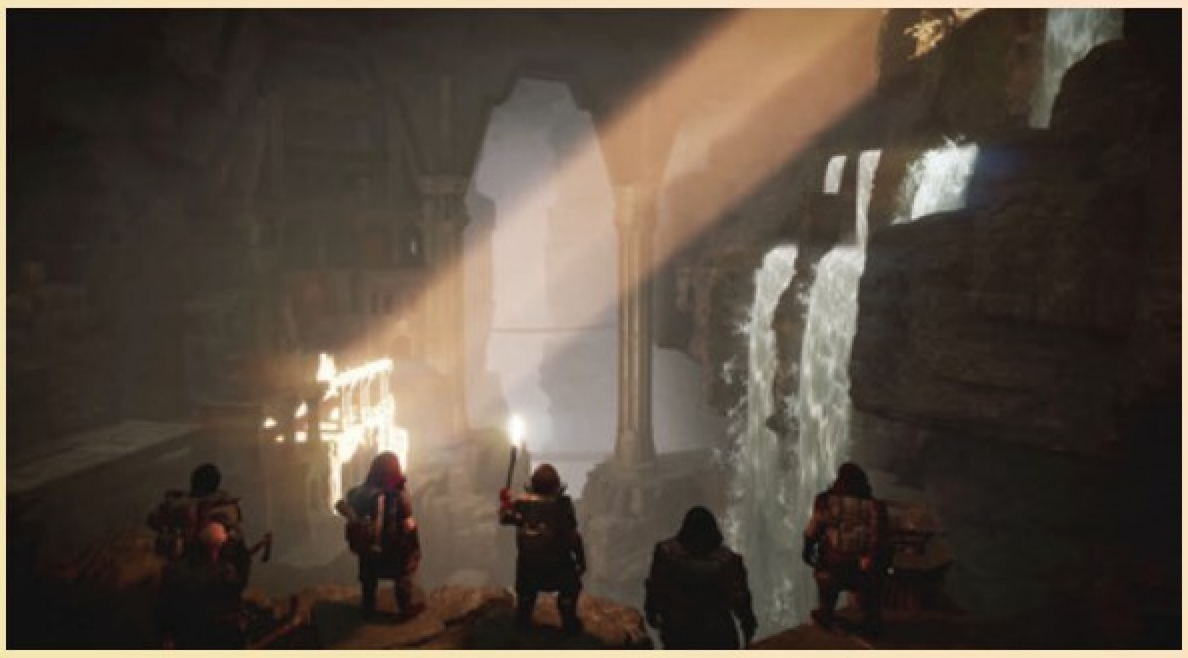
VENBA

Unravel the story of an Indian mother, Venba, who moves to Canada with her family. Set in the 1980s, the narrative explores themes of communication, cultural identity, and love through branching dialogue and cooking. In trying to restore a recipe book damaged during the move, Venba will keep her family connected to their roots while navigating a new life. **BY JILL GRODT**



PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Visai Studios
DEVELOPER Visai Studios **RELEASE** TBA

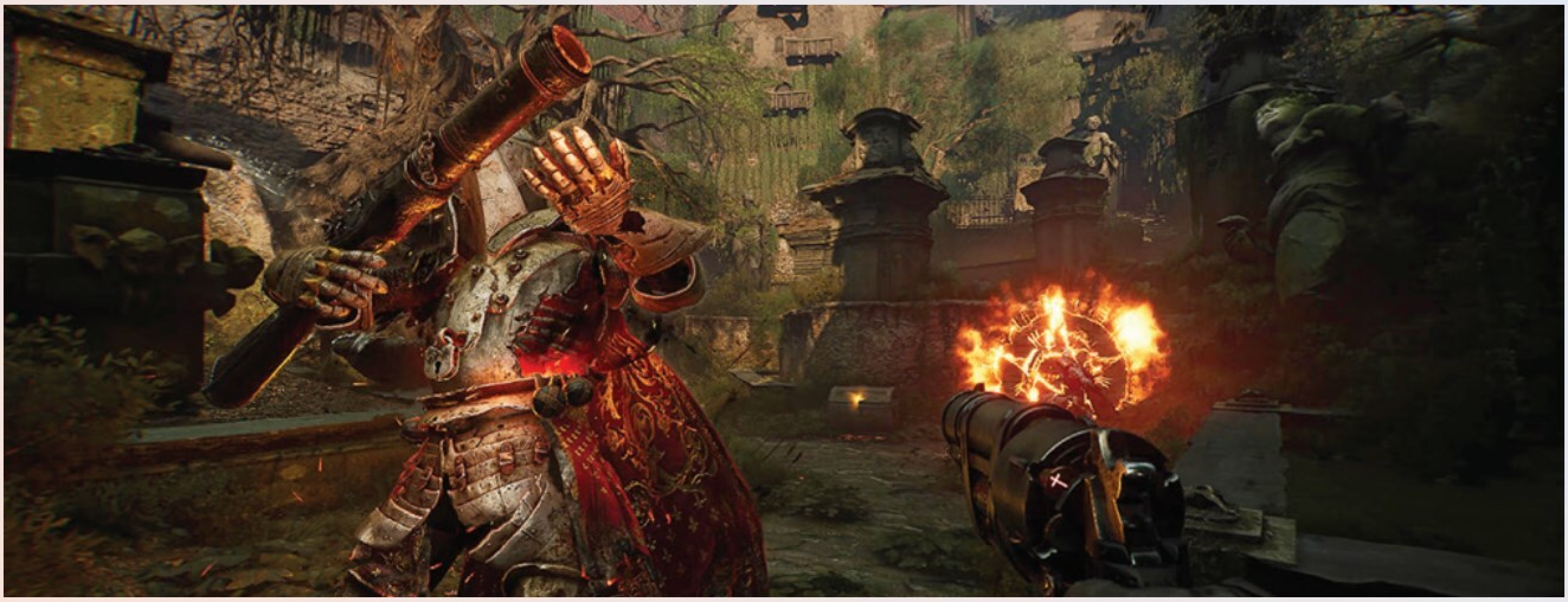
THE LORD OF THE RINGS: RETURN TO MORIA



Following the destruction of The One Ring, the dwarves must return to the overrun halls of Khazad-dûm and reclaim their birthright. Players craft their unique dwarf, and cooperate with up to seven other of Durin's Folk to mine the tunnels, construct fortresses, fight off orcs, and rebuild Moria. But manage your noise levels; something terrible still dwells in the deep shadows.

BY MATT MILLER

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Simulation (8-Player Online)
PUBLISHER North Beach Games **DEVELOPER** Free Range Games **RELEASE** Spring



WITCHFIRE

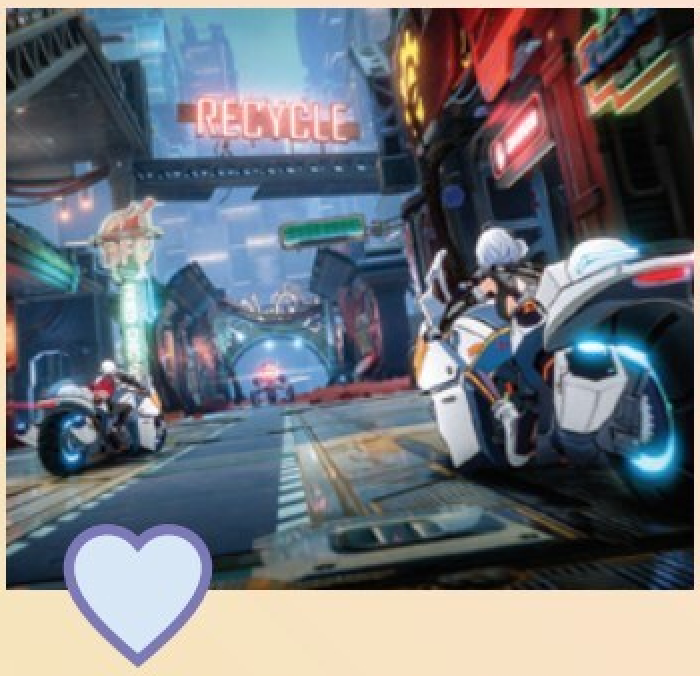
The development team behind The Vanishing of Ethan Carter is going in a surprising new direction with the supernatural shooter Witchfire. Tight, fast-moving single-player combat has the hand cannon-wielding protagonist bringing down undead in gorgeous medieval-inspired environments. Think Destiny-style gunplay with a roguelite loop through a dark fantasy world. **BY MATT MILLER**

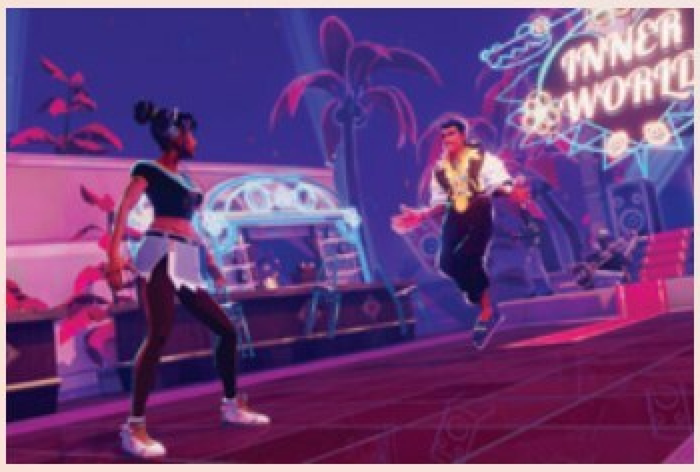
PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** The Astronauts **DEVELOPER** The Astronauts **RELEASE** TBA

TOWER OF FANTASY

Tower of Fantasy has been kicking around since early this year, but it had a big showing at Summer Game Fest. Anime in style and presentation, it's an open-world multiplayer sci-fi game coming to mobile and PC this year. Your mission is to combat the Heirs of Aida on their home planet of, you guessed it, Aida. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM PC • iOS • Android **STYLE** Online Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Level Infinite **DEVELOPER** Hotta Studio **RELEASE** 2022





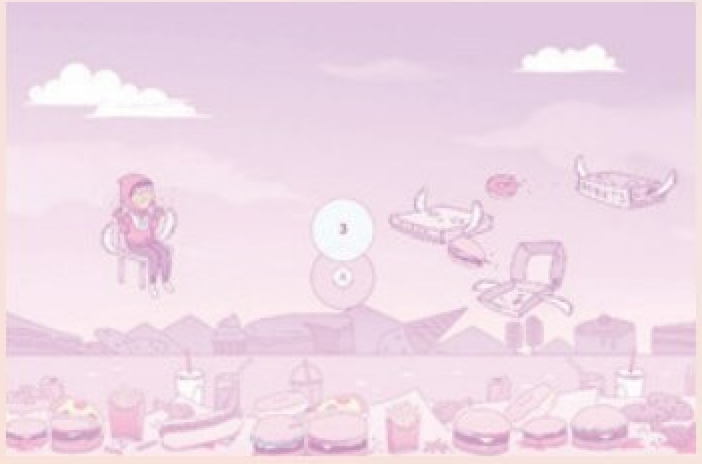
THIRSTY SUITORS

Its vibrant look and wild premise make Thirsty Suitors one of the most intriguing games coming in the future. Playing as Jala, a single woman returning to her parents' home for her sister's wedding, you'll fight the pressures of expectation. Also, in explosive, metaphorical, and eye-popping battles, prepare to go toe-to-toe with scores of exes and would-be suitors. **BY JILL GRODT**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Adventure **PUBLISHER** Annapurna Interactive **DEVELOPER** Outerloop Games **RELEASE** TBA

MELATONIN

This dreamy rhythm game didn't catch my eye at first. Its pastel aesthetic is unquestionably attractive, but the initial pitch – sleep-inspired music minigames – left me ambivalent. But after playing the game's demo, I'm a sweet dream believer. Melatonin's whimsical levels, pitch-perfect challenges, and surreal vibe make for a mesmerizing experience. **BY JILL GRODT**



PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Rhythm **PUBLISHER** Half Asleep **DEVELOPER** Half Asleep **RELEASE** September 16

SUNDAY GOLD

Bloody aftermaths of crimes

Waking in the vein of ZA/UM's Disco Elysium, released in 2019, Sunday Gold is a CRPG recalling the golden age of point-and-click adventures. The game, developed by BKOM Studios, was announced in June at the Future Games Show.

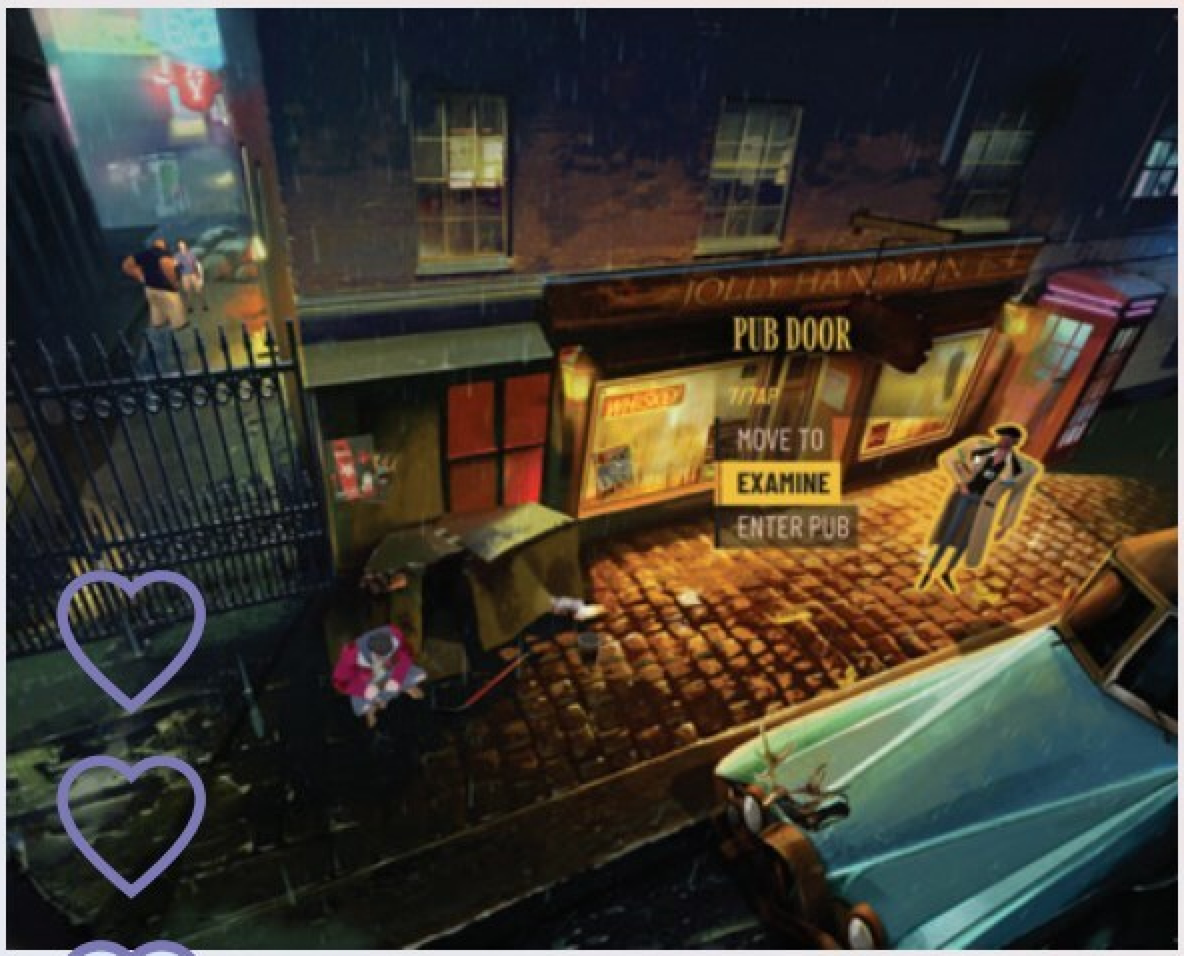
Set in London, Black Sunday's virtual version is somehow more grimy and dystopian than its real-world counterpart. The game's lead characters, a group of three criminals, set out to discover the truth behind the billionaire businessman Keny Hogan. Like all billionaires, Hogan is corrupt and unethical.

You play as Sally "The Activist" Wheeler, Gavin "The Disgruntled Employee" Dorsey, and Frank "The Vengeful Ex-Con Barber" on their hunt to take down Hogan. As you might expect, since this is a video game, that mainly means violence. Battles play out in turn-based combat, where you monitor your stress level on top of juggling foes. If that stress level reaches zero, your character acts impulsively.

Additionally, per the game's Steam page, players are invited to lose themselves in the "hand-drawn environments, 2D cinematics and comic book inspired sequences" full of "observation, deduction, and inventory puzzles."

Lastly, and most interestingly, buried at the end of Sunday Gold's Steam page is a precarious list of Mature content warnings, which includes, but isn't limited to, "Experimentations on humans and animals," "Morgue scene featuring body parts," "Crime scene featuring [the] bloody aftermath of crime." So at the very least, Sunday Gold sounds like a gruesome game, if that's your thing.

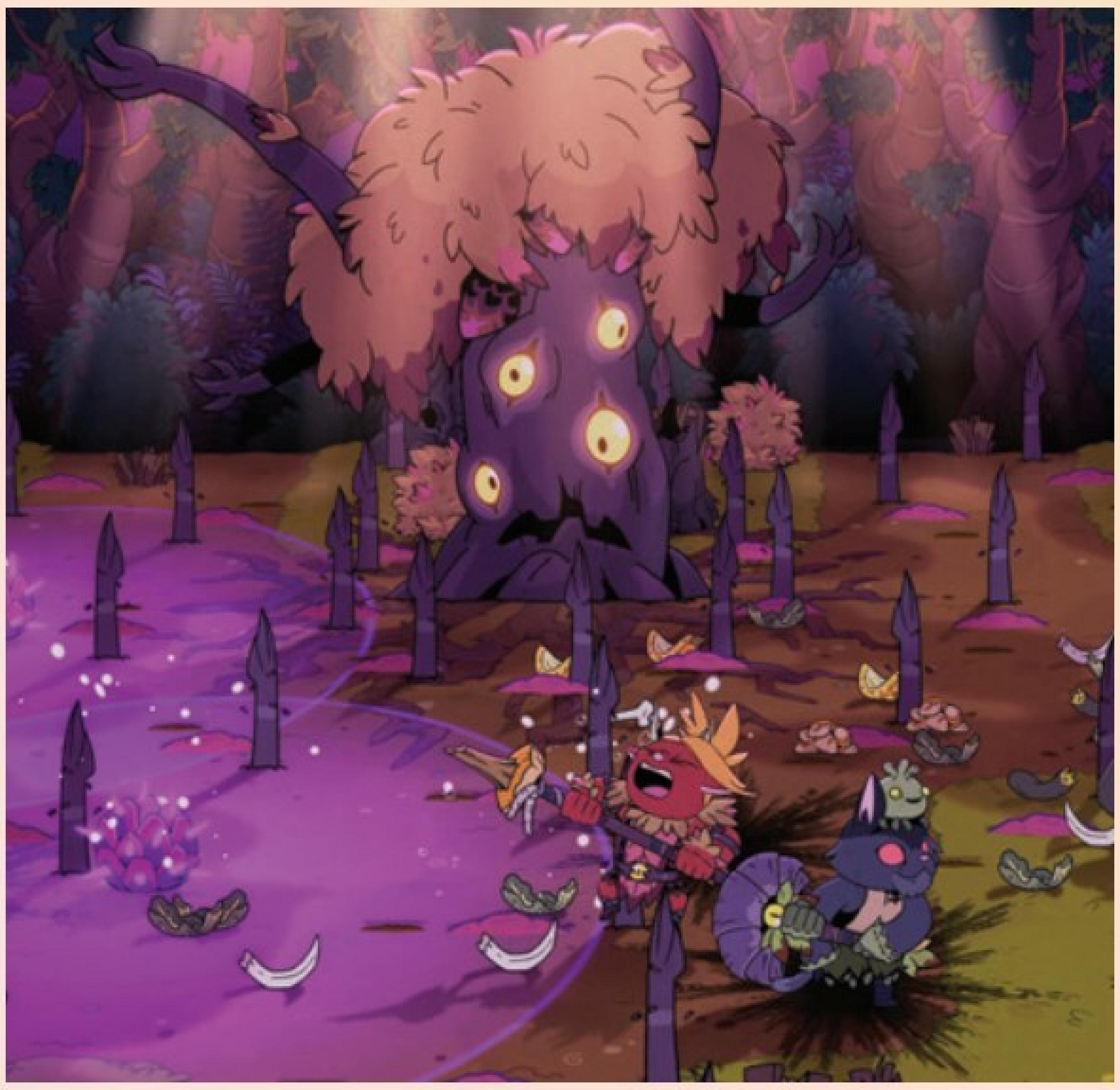
Currently, Sunday Gold is only announced for PC, and it doesn't have a firm release date. Nevertheless, you can expect to play it sometime this year. **BY BLAKE HESTER**



PLATFORM PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Team17
DEVELOPER BKOM Studios **RELEASE** 2022

ROTWOOD

Woodland warriors



Klei Entertainment, the studio behind games like Don't Starve and most recently Griftlands, has revealed its newest project. Once again, it flexes the developer's animation chops. Rotwood is a cartoony roguelike dungeon crawler designed to be played with up to four people. Each run takes your handful of cute animal avatars through a dangerous forest, where the challenge amplifies the deeper you go. New armor and weapons can be crafted from items scavenged, and a central haven can be built and fortified.

Combat plays in action-packed battles on a diorama-like plane filled with vegetation and dangerous denizens of the forest. Early footage shows a variety of hammers and spears used as weapons. That's not to say that everything requires violence. Players come across dialogue options that also shape a run through the Rotwood.

In typical Klei style, the hand-drawn look of the characters and enemies is unreal. Once again, the studio pushes the boundaries of making it look like you're controlling a cartoon character; Rotwood's models are expressive, fluid, and bursting with personality. I can't wait to see what Rotwood looks and plays like in action.

The trailer gave a nebulous Early Access date of "202?" which could be anytime in the next decade, though I'd expect us to play it well before 2030. Rotwood is only announced for Steam at this time, but like many of Klei's past titles, we have a good feeling it will show up on a console or two by the time it hits its 1.0 launch. **BY JOHN CARSON**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Action
PUBLISHER Klei Entertainment
DEVELOPER Klei Entertainment **RELEASE** TBA

ROLLERDROME

A roller-skating blood sport adventure

Kara Hassan is about to make a name for herself – if she can stay alive. In 2030, the world hungers for fresh entertainment, which comes in the form of a new blood sport called Rollerdrome. Hassan is a rookie and will soon be able to show off her roller skating and sharpshooting abilities. As she enters the field, she learns Rollerdrome's founding corporation, Matterhorn, may be keeping dark secrets. A dark conspiracy bubbles to the surface as blood flies into the arena.

This original story-driven sports game is from Roll7, the studio behind the OlliOlli series. As the wheels under your feet rip across varied terrain, dazzling the crowd with your flips and twirls, you'll be gunning for the competition. Rollerdrome is a third-person shooter with unconventional mobility. Your goal is to rise on the leaderboards by being the last one standing at the match's end.

Taking out foes nets health bumps while grinding and tricking bring ammunition rewards. Rollerdrome appears to be one of those shooters where you can't stop moving and need to tear it up to take down the house competitions (much like the American Gladiators).

Rollerdrome will be released on PlayStation consoles and PC on August 16. **BY ANDREW REINER**

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Sports **PUBLISHER** Private Division
DEVELOPER Roll7 **RELEASE** August 16

TINYKIN

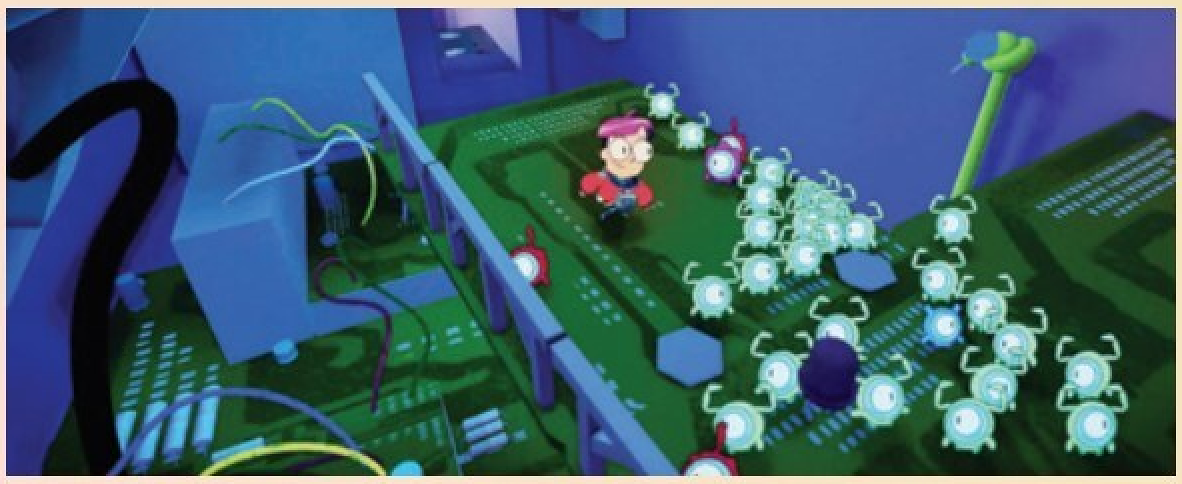
Found family

Tinykin, Splashteam's odd, Pikmin-like adventure, touts an infectiously playful vibe. Milo winds up on an empty Earth, perpetually stuck in 1991. As the planet's newest minuscule resident, he befriends the multi-colored armies of Tinykin, silly little creatures equipped with the perfect combination of abilities Milo needs to return to his own world.

Navigable domestic environments have become cityscapes for Earth's smallest critters and emphasize puzzle-solving/platforming. Milo relies on pink Tinykin to lift objects like platforms, green to form climbable ladders, blue for electric currents that can activate electronics, and Daniel, the lone red Tinykin, to blow up obstacles. The Tinykin are particularly resourceful and can be utilized to open new pathways, gain access to seemingly out-of-reach ledges, and keep any unanticipated dangers at bay.

While exploring the gargantuan expanses of an abandoned home, Milo runs into insects like ants and beetles who've created their own societies in the wake of humanity's sudden disappearance. Some of the bugs will be interactable characters that help Milo unearth the mysteries of the weird time period and humankind's eerie absence.

In each room, players collect Tinykin to progress exploration – the more companions you have, the more you can do. Zip between the leaves of houseplants, peek beneath the harmonic bars of a forsaken guitar or jog around dusty wine glasses in a dish rack, all while collecting clues about the world around you and forging a way home. **BY JASON GUISAO**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** tinyBuild
DEVELOPER Splashteam **RELEASE** August 30

FORZA MOTORSPORT

The next evolution of driving simulation

Forza Horizon 5's 2021 success brought the open-world, arcade-racing spin-off series to new heights, but 2023 signals the return of the original Forza series: Motorsport. This simulation-style racing franchise has been absent for nearly five years following Forza Motorsport 7 in 2017, but Xbox is ready to bring back its mainline Motorsport early next year.

Our first look at Forza Motorsport came through Maple Valley, a fan-favorite track from the first Forza game in 2005. While we also got looks at Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps, Laguna Seca Raceway, Kyalami Grand Prix Circuit, and Circuit Hakone, Maple Valley steals the spotlight. That's thanks to its gorgeous fall colors and the attention to detail on everything from the road and grass to the foliage and water. Seeing these tracks brought to life with the photorealism the series is known for is a sight to behold, especially once the cars begin roaring around the corners and down the straightaways.

While speeding around those tracks, the beauty of the environment is evident, but the cars are still the stars of the show. For this entry, developer Turn 10 Studios overhauled its physics to have 48 times the fidelity of past simulations and used real-time raytracing to deliver authentic lighting and reflections on the vehicles. Players can also expect advanced car damage mechanics that consider things like the directionality of impact, how paint peels based on the edges of a vehicle, dirt build-up, and wheel abrasions. The development team also added new features like tire and fuel management and multiple tire compounds to bring the trackside pits to life in new ways. These improvements compound to achieve what Turn 10 calls a "generational leap in immersion."

Perhaps paramount to its immersion aspirations is Forza Motorsport's dynamic time of day system, which adds changes in temperature, weather, and elements as races progress. These factors all contribute to impacting the track surface in sometimes subtle ways. For example, the track temperature affects things like the grip your tires have on the track.

One of the chief complaints about the current generation of console hardware is that most games have been cross-generation. Forza Motorsport does away with last gen support to focus solely on Xbox Series X/S and PC. As such, Xbox and Turn 10 tout that this entry is built from the ground up for the more powerful hardware, which has enabled them to implement all the aforementioned improvements. Hopefully, that spells even greater heights for the franchise and its traditionally stunning presentation when the game launches in spring of next year.

BY BRIAN SHEA

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Racing (Multiplayer TBA) **PUBLISHER** Xbox Game Studios
DEVELOPER Turn 10 Studios **RELEASE** Spring

STARFIELD

A cosmic adventure with over 1,000 planets to explore

From The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim to Fallout 4, Bethesda Game Studios is known for making massive role-playing experiences that embrace player choice and allow for hundreds of hours of exploration. The studio's next project, the space adventure Starfield, looks to dwarf both titles with over 1,000 explorable planets.

Our first look at gameplay hints at the variety when traveling the cosmos – from untamed wildernesses filled with alien dinosaurs to advanced cities looking like they belong in a *Blade Runner* film. An ice world may hold little in terms of life but could be a key destination for mining minerals. Deep beneath the surface of another planet, you could find signs of ancient life and perhaps even an artifact unlocking the universe's secrets.

Set in 2330, you are one of the last space explorers racing to secure these artifacts. You begin your quest by working for an organization called Constellation, which gives you the resources to reach the stars. What happens next is likely up to you.

Like any other Bethesda Game Studios title, you begin with designing your character. Game director Todd Howard says Starfield's character creator is the studio's most flexible yet, allowing players to fine tune nearly every detail. You define who your character is by selecting a background – such as beast hunter, cyberneticist, gangster, combat medic, or even chef – that gives you three starting skills. During Starfield, your background story comes into play while interacting with characters and the universe. You can also apply optional traits to your character, each with advantages and disadvantages. If you select introvert, you gain more endurance when adventuring alone but lose some when human companions join you. The odd Serpent's Embrace trait boosts health when gravity jumping, but decreases health if you don't jump often.

As you progress, you unlock additional skills that Howard says "combines the best of our previous three games." You can level these skills and raise their ranks through use and completing specific challenges. The only example we see of the game's skills is for Ballistics, which you can rank three times. Each rank generates 10 percent more damage.

When you travel deep into space to new solar systems, you'll have the opportunity to set up camp wherever you see fit. The base building looks like Fallout 4's, allowing for modular construction and devices that help you along the way.

The most exciting customization in Starfield is the ability to construct your starship. You get to design every inch of it, right down to the hull's shape, color, engines, shields, and weapons. You control that starship, roaring from a planet's surface into the stars where you encounter rival spacecraft. Conflicts look intense, with laser blasts ripping across the void and cluttered debris fields left in the wake of destroyed ships.

When you find a planet to explore, you can freely land on it and disembark your ship. You can play from first- or third-person when on foot, and take readings of the alien worlds. We see one reading for iron (Fe), which can be mined for resources to enhance your ship, outpost, and other things like weapons and mods.

Our first peek at Starfield's combat is within an industrial facility on the moon Kreet. Combat is the one area that looks rough around the edges, such as how AI reacts (or neglects to) when getting shot. The weapons pack a punch, however, and despite having sci-fi shells, they mostly rattle off bullets in a modern way. Combat doesn't have the spectacle or sci-fi allure of the world traversal or alien wildlife. The most exciting moment we see is a sequence where the protagonist uses a jetpack in low gravity to leap across a chasm. Mid-flight, a clip is unloaded into a group of pirates raiding the facility. If you see a foe wearing a jetpack, one hit on a fuel tank will send him soaring comically into the sky.

Despite the lackluster first taste of combat, Starfield impressed me. The sheer scale is difficult to comprehend, but I can't wait to see how Bethesda sews a story into cosmic exploration. As time passes until its 2023 release, I will dream up my starship, which will probably look a lot like a boxy *Millennium Falcon*. **BY ANDREW REINER**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Bethesda Softworks, Microsoft
DEVELOPER Bethesda Game Studios
RELEASE 2023

DESTA: THE MEMORIES BETWEEN

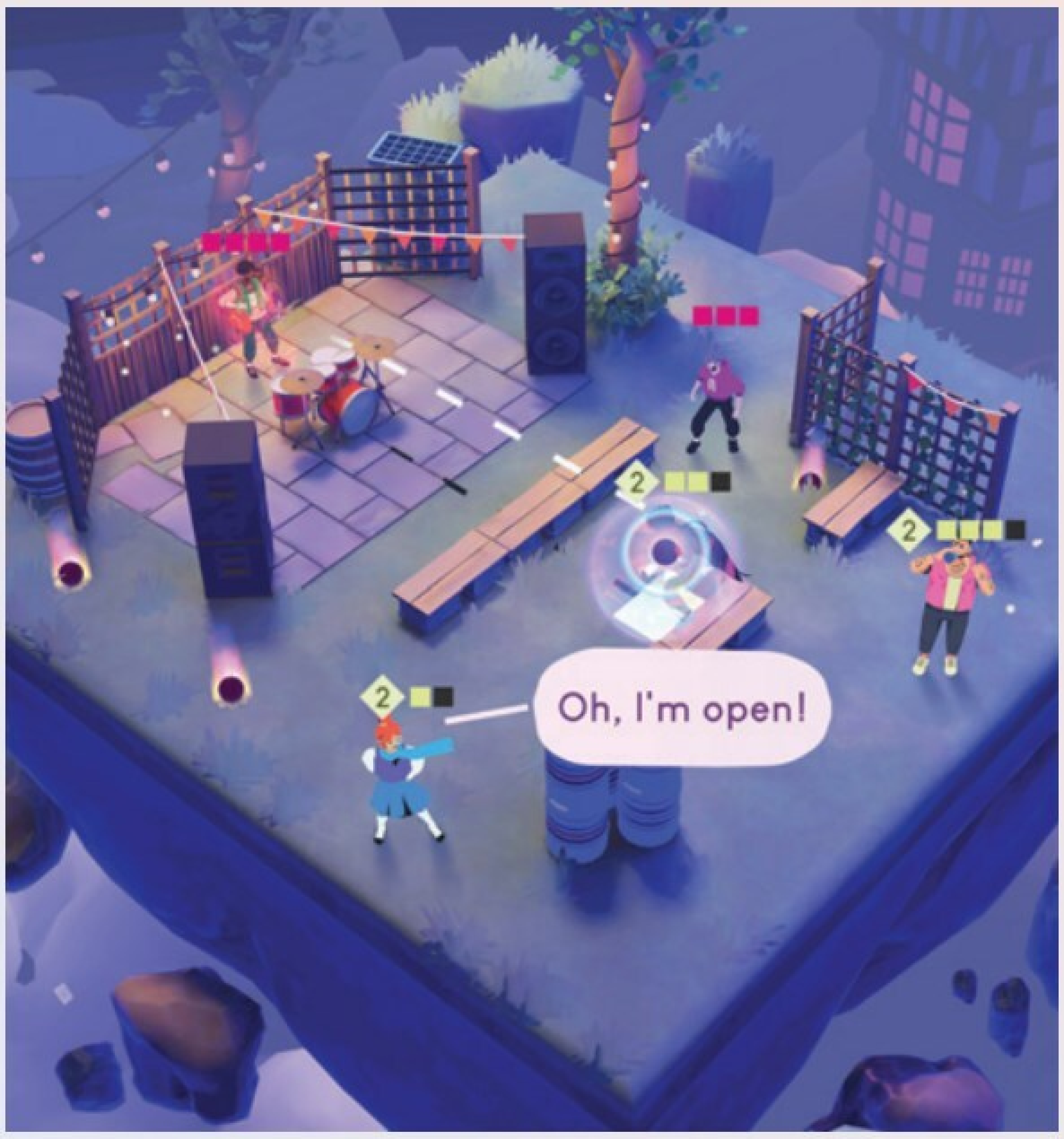
Story-driven ball throwing

Desta: The Memories Between is the next game from the team behind the Monument Valley series. While delivering a similar pastel, storybook look, the gameplay is radically different and appears to focus intently on throwing a glowing ball with great precision.

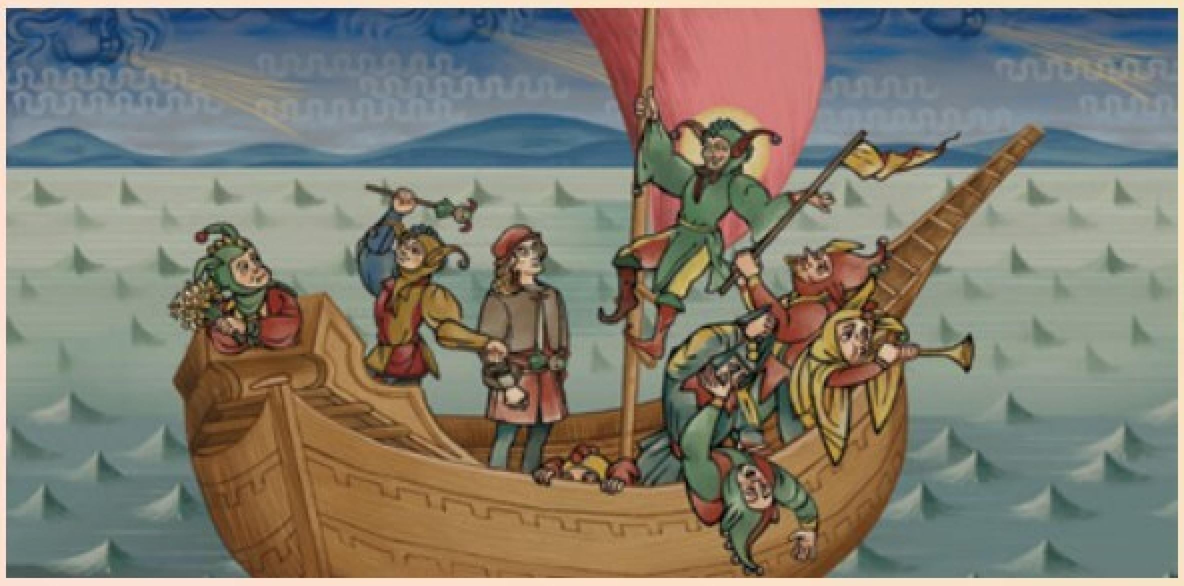
Players assume the role of Desta, a character in their early 20s who returns home after a significant time away. Desta didn't leave on the best terms and returns to find themselves while mending relationships. Developer Ustwogames' says The Memories Between delivers a "story of broken relationships, words left unsaid, and the chance to explore your own dreams for answers."

When Desta falls asleep holding a favorite ball from childhood, they appear in a world between worlds, not awake or asleep. Those locations are small gameplay fields floating among the clouds. Desta must hit specific targets with their ball, aiming with pinpoint precision, displayed with a trajectory meter much like in golf games. This challenge includes tricky moments where Desta must line up shots that ricochet and hit multiple targets in one throw.

Desta: The Memories Between will first appear on mobile devices through a Netflix publishing deal and on consoles and PC later. **BY ANDREW REINER**



PLATFORM Console (TBA) • PC • iOS • Android
STYLE 1-Player Action/Strategy **PUBLISHER** Ustwogames
DEVELOPER Ustwogames **RELEASE** TBA



PENTIMENT

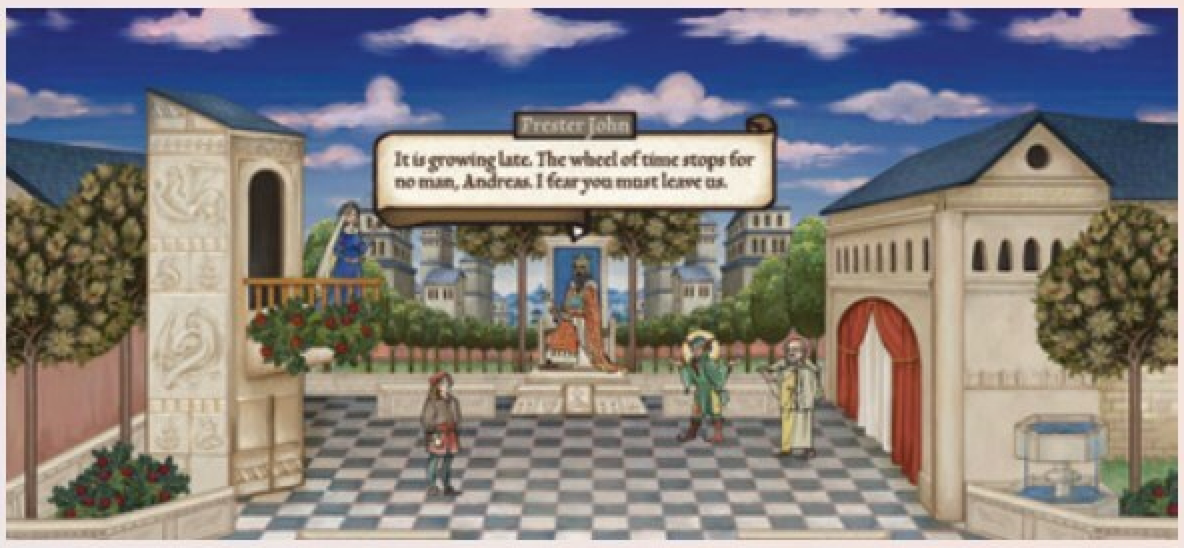
An illuminating shift in style

A pentimento is an underlying image in a painting, often one that only becomes visible after age has worn away the top layer. The writers at Obsidian Entertainment, who previously created games like The Outer Worlds and Pillars of Eternity, must have an excellent reason to apply the term to their newest game, a narrative adventure set in 16th century Bavaria. And I'm betting it has to do with the mystery at the story's heart.

In this historical fiction game, players control a journeyman artist named Andreas Maler working out of a Benedictine abbey. Rather than zero in on a particular moment in time, the game tracks his life over 25 years. During this time, he becomes embroiled in a series of murders that lead to an elaborate conspiracy, but the choices players make on his behalf determine how everything shakes out. While the setting shifts over that period, Obsidian is especially interested in reflecting on the changes in characters and their personalities over such a long stretch.

The game's art style is one of its most striking features, combining inspirations from late medieval illuminated manuscripts and woodcuts. Early glimpses of the game reveal a distinctive approach to character and environment, calling to mind those manuscript illustrations and helping set Pentiment apart.

The historical nods are more than visual; Pentiment is also interested in how history can be written and rewritten over time. It leads to the question: what really happened in the past when all that remains are the art and writings people left behind? **BY MATT MILLER**



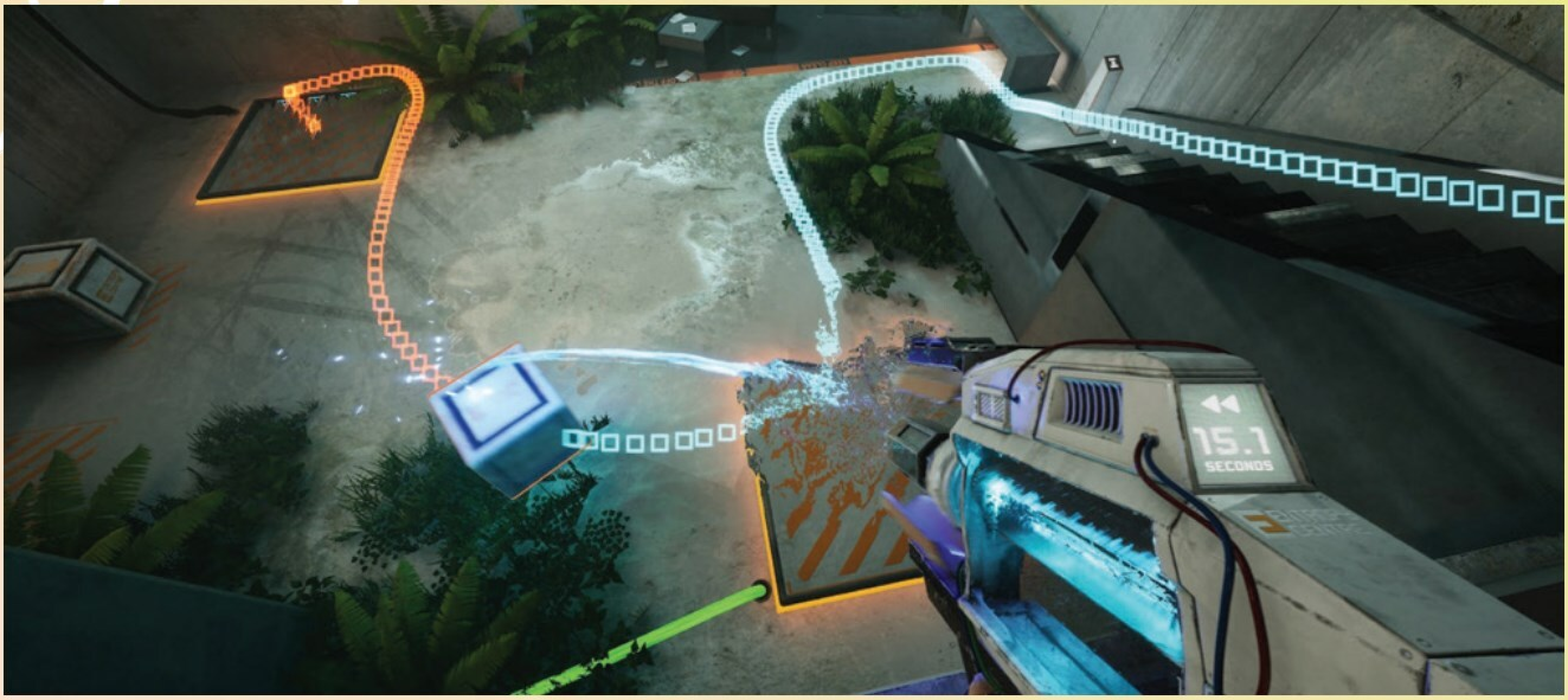
Prester John

It is growing late. The wheel of time stops for no man, Andreas. I fear you must leave us.

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Xbox Game Studios
DEVELOPER Obsidian Entertainment **RELEASE** November

THE ENTROPY CENTRE

Turn back time



The Entropy Centre is a first-person sci-fi puzzle adventure game from Stubby Games, a new British indie studio, and the project looks promising.

The reveal trailer showcases how gorgeous this sci-fi world is, but that beauty is in danger. Earth is on fire and set to explode, which will destroy everything remotely close to it. Luckily, the game's main character, Aria, has a special gun with the ability to turn back time. With it, she might be able to stop Earth's destruction. But it won't be easy. The Entropy Centre is built around a puzzle mechanic that "allows players to think in reverse and overcome seemingly impossible obstacles." As if straightforward puzzles weren't challenging enough.

"Players join the game's protagonist, Aria, as she awakens inside the bowels of a colossal space station – The Entropy Centre – in near-orbit of Earth," Stubby Games revealed following the title's debut trailer. "Two immediate problems face her: Earth has been set ablaze from an extinction-level event, and The Entropy Centre itself appears abandoned and on the brink of imminent collapse."

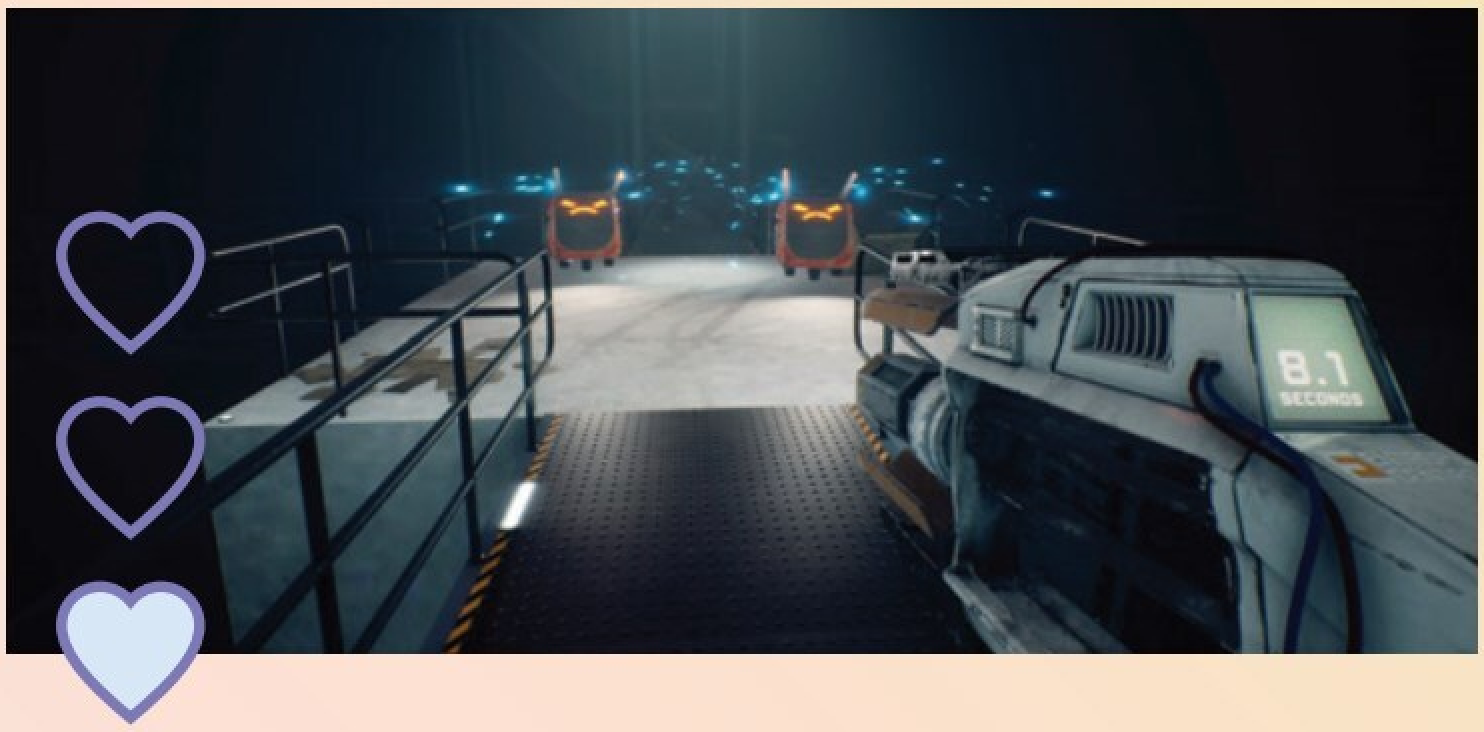
Determined to find the solution to her deadly predicament, Aria, with the help of her unusual companion/weapon Astra, sets out to restore everything to what it should be – or at least to a time when things weren't so dire. Astra, a talking gun capable of moving objects backward in time, is the key to everything. Aria uses it to restore The Entropy Centre's collapsed bridges, reassemble destroyed pathways, and solve puzzles. All in the hopes of finding her way home.

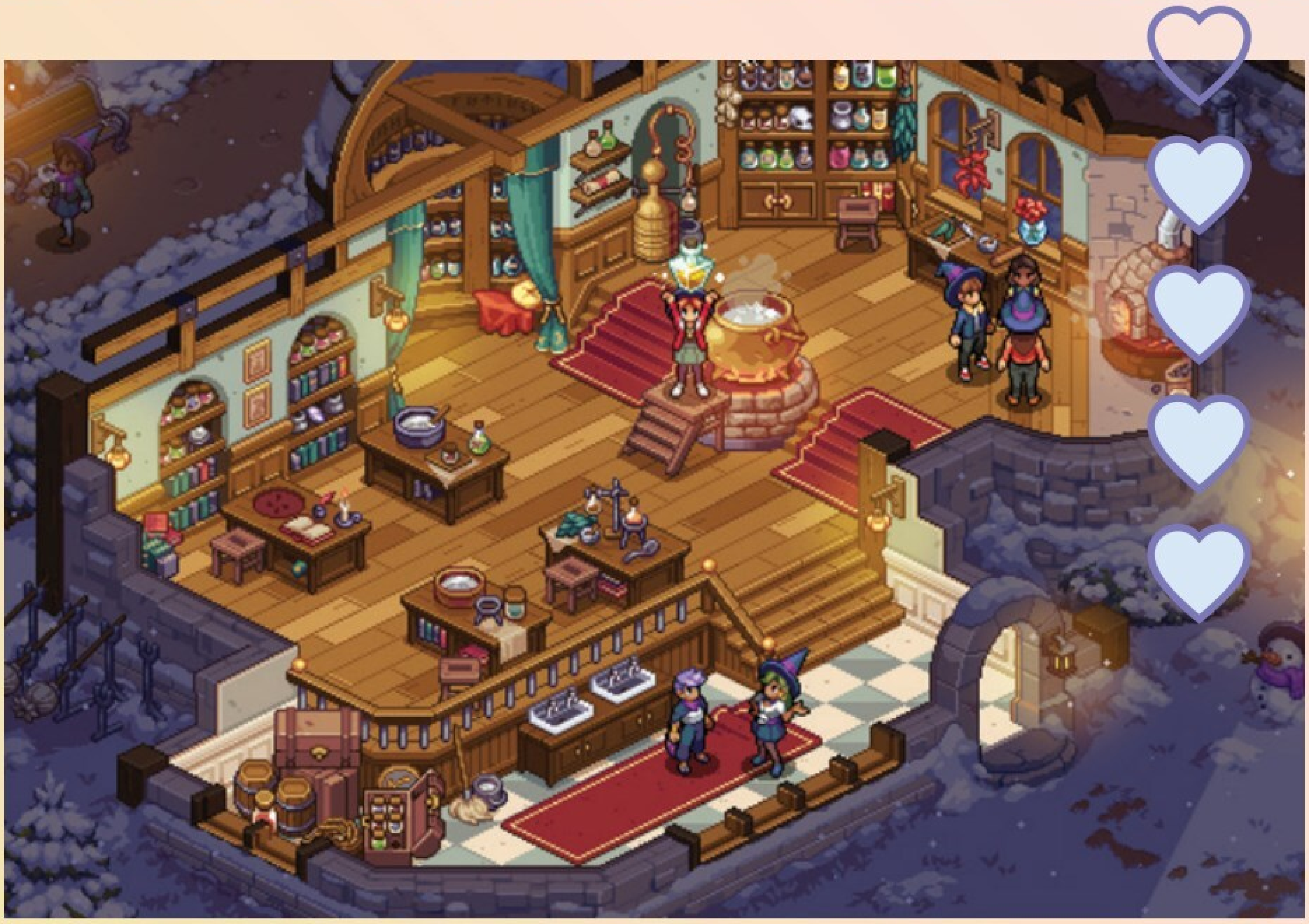
Stubby Games founder Daniel Stubbington says The Entropy Centre "isn't pulling any punches." The reveal trailer highlights a very Portal-esque take on sci-fi. The world is exploding, and the space station is heading toward imminent destruction. But that doesn't mean there isn't time for cheeky jokes and a good puzzle or two.

Visually, The Entropy Centre is very high-tech – or at least it used to be. The station itself reminds me of the one in 2017's Prey, but with a more subdued and brutalist look. It appears the constructors designed it so that in most places throughout the station, there's glass that looks outward into space. In the trailer, those views come with the terrifying reminder that Earth is entirely on fire, and I like that this appears to be an in-game way to keep the stakes ramped up. And while it is indeed terrifying, it also looks gorgeous, or at least as great as an Earth about to explode can look.

The Entropy Centre's story remains mysterious for now – how exactly did Earth come to be set ablaze is a question I hope to see answered – but we won't have to wait too long to learn more. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle
PUBLISHER Playstack **DEVELOPER** Stubby Games **RELEASE** 2022





WITCHBROOK

Socializing and sorcery

Following the tactical-focused Wargroove and its previous intergalactic sandbox Starbound, Chucklefish has unveiled more information on its long-awaited next project, Witchbrook. Its premise is part Stardew Valley, a standout day-to-day farming and life sim, with a hefty dose of Harry Potter's Wizarding World mixed in. However, despite leaning heavily on its direct inspirations, this mystical academic adventure may have plenty of magic of its own.

As a fledgling witch, you'll enroll at Witchbrook College, where you'll learn the ins and outs of magic and what comes with it. You'll live the wizarding school fantasy by attending spellbinding classes, brewing potions, and practicing enchantment casting everywhere you go. Other activities await when you're not focused on class assignments and earning badge rewards for your hard work, like racing on broomsticks and scavenging for ingredients for the next witch's brews.

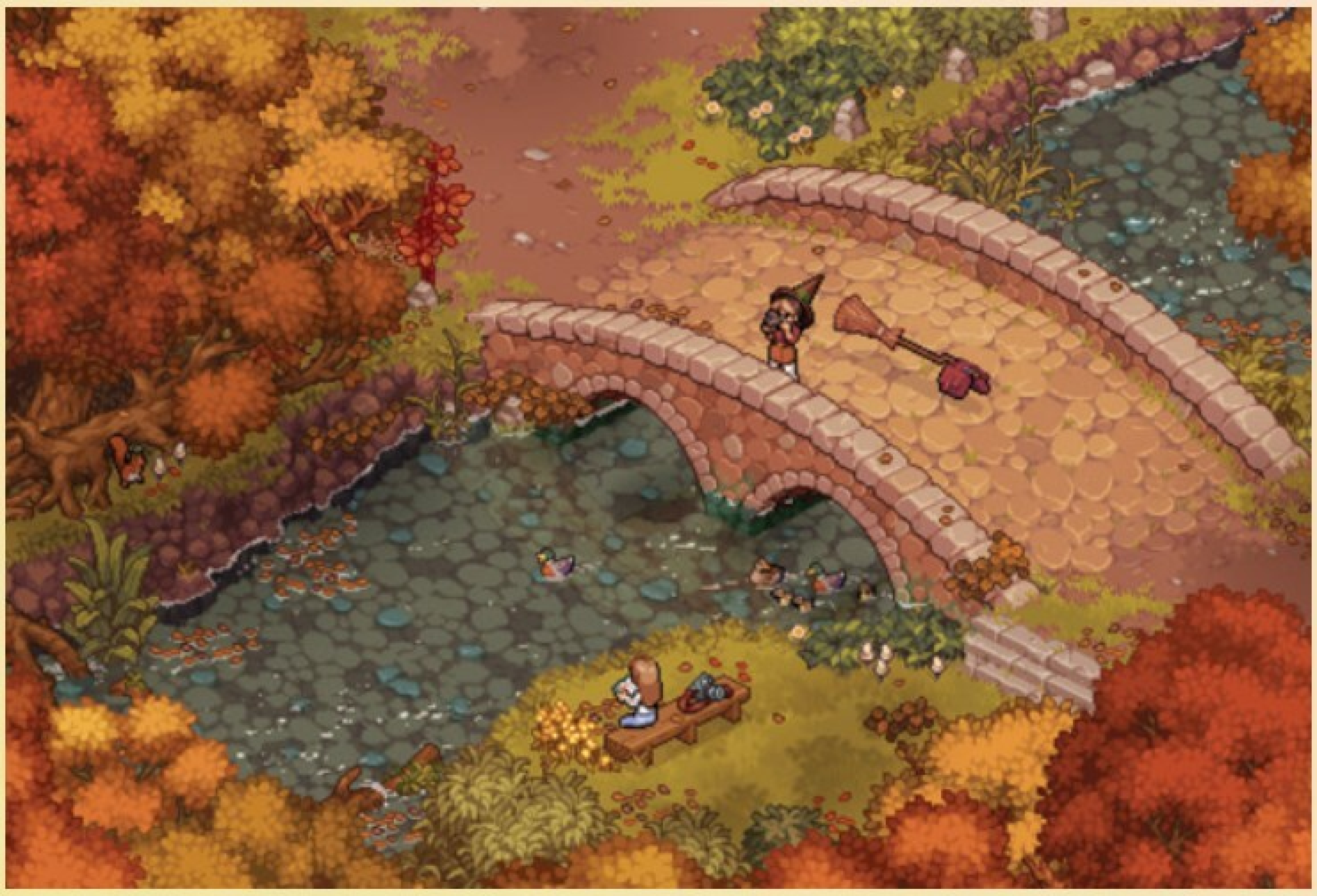
Magic isn't restricted to the college's boundaries; there's also an entire town to explore. Reminiscent of Studio Ghibli's coming-of-age classic *Kiki's Delivery Service*, your character takes on the role of the resident witch in a seaside town called Mossport, a job you inherited from a magical ancestor. There you'll explore the area, meet the residents, learn about the history and secrets of the active, flourishing city, and use magical abilities in various situations.

Since Witchbrook is a personal journey through the life of a young witch, I'm happy to learn Chucklefish is finding ways for player expression. It starts with your witch avatar, whom you can dress in various clothing and accessories, along with a preferred hairstyle and color. Your living quarters and surrounding area are also canvases for creativity. Unlike most college experiences, you'll stay in a woodland cottage instead of a cramped dorm room, which can be renovated to your liking. Outside, you can also tend the garden, creating a lush environment for the local wildlife to live and thrive.

Witchbrook looks to have plenty of characters to get to know and even romance. People you meet may have unique storylines letting you learn about their likes, dislikes, hopes, and dreams. These relationships are typically the emotionally resonant parts of a life sim, so a lot is hinging on the cast to be endearing and memorable.

According to the developers, your journey won't be over when your time at the academy ends. The game allows you to continue living the witched life after getting a diploma. Having graduated from Witchbrook College, your incantations and witchcraft are a boon to the townsfolk, and you can make an honest living doing deliveries by broomstick and other witchy tasks. Still, a witch can always continue their training, honing their craft after leaving behind the academic structure and testing.

I've been intrigued by Witchbrook's concept since its announcement, and these newest morsels of information sound wonderful on paper. The ingredients it's stirring into the bubbling cauldron could make Witchbrook a potent potion, but we won't know for sure until we finally get our hands on it. **BY JOHN CARSON**



PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation (TBA Online) **PUBLISHER** Chucklefish
DEVELOPER Chucklefish **RELEASE** TBA

ILL

Ill looks disgusting. Even though its reveal during the Future Games Show was just 30 seconds long, there is a year's worth of teaser videos on YouTube you can watch. If your stomach can handle it, I can't recommend them enough. Details on Ill might be scant, but at the very least, it looks like Team Clout is making one of the grossest games of all time. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER Team Clout
DEVELOPER Team Clout **RELEASE** TBA

OUTPOST (WORKING TITLE)

Outpost is part action-packed first-person shooter, part settlement-building tower defense. The multiplayer title tasks players with gunning down enemies while also scavenging for materials to construct, you guessed it, outposts. These bases can be kitted out with numerous weapons for defending from incoming invaders, and you can manufacture resources such as ammo. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER Lightning Games
DEVELOPER Team Ranger **RELEASE** TBA

SHIP OF FOOLS

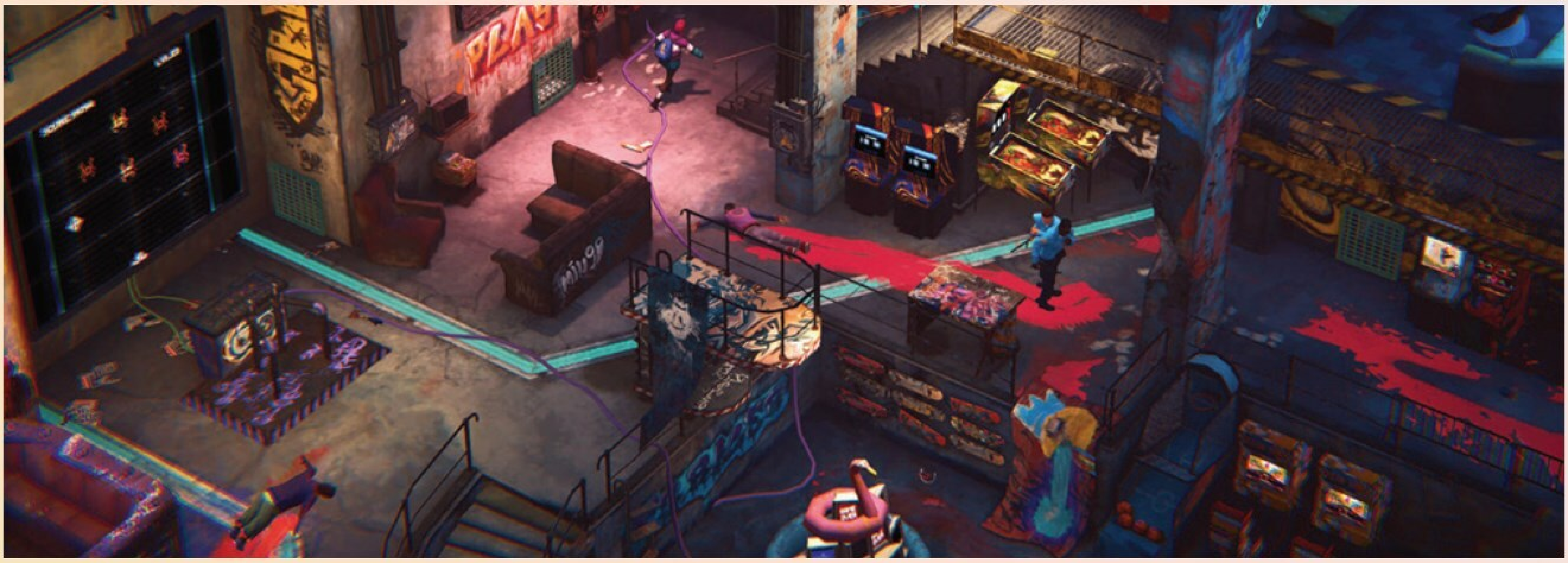
This cooperative nautical roguelite mixes the chaotic elements of Overcooked and the course-charting adventures of FTL. Players frantically staff positions on a ship to defend themselves and the vessel from the dangers lurking in the briny deep while sailing to new locations. Along the way, you'll visit mysterious islands and collect treasure, trinkets, and power-ups to make sure each wacky journey becomes a successful voyage. **BY JOHN CARSON**

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1 to 2-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Team17
DEVELOPER Fika Productions **RELEASE** 2022

SERIAL CLEANERS

Serial Cleaners tasks players with scrubbing crime scenes inspired by Quentin Tarantino's films and other classic action and crime thrillers of the '90s. Stealth is core to the experience; you can't let the authorities know what happened or that you were even there. Serial Cleaners brings four characters to mop up blood, bodies, and clues, each handling business in their own way. **BY JOHN CARSON**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** 505 Games **DEVELOPER** Draw Distance **RELEASE** TBA



WANTED: DEAD

Sliced into ribbons

At the very least, Wanted: Dead has some pedigree behind it. Developer Soleil Ltd. was founded by Yoshifuru Okamoto, the co-producer of Ninja Gaiden II. And while in 2022, it does feel really weird playing as a police officer killing scores and scores of people, the game looks and plays competently while you do so. Every game has *something* going for it if you look hard enough.

Wanted: Dead puts you in the role of Lieutenant Hannah Stone, a member of the Zombie Unit special police force in Hong Kong, which, over just one week, attempts "to uncover a major corporate conspiracy." That doesn't seem like much time, but then again, what do I know?

You do so by shooting, hacking, and slashing your way through Hong Kong's underbelly – if you can get through all the "mercenaries," "gang members," and "private military contractors" Wanted: Dead throws your way. The game treats you to any one of the more than 50 "brutal" finishers when you shoot, hack, and slash well enough. These options include, but aren't limited to, shooting a man directly in his face from an inch away and chopping off limbs like they were nothing but pieces of birthday cake.

We had the chance to check out an early build of Wanted: Dead and the game is slick looking. The cyberpunk-inspired Hong Kong setting looks fantastic with all its neon, modern architecture, and tall buildings.

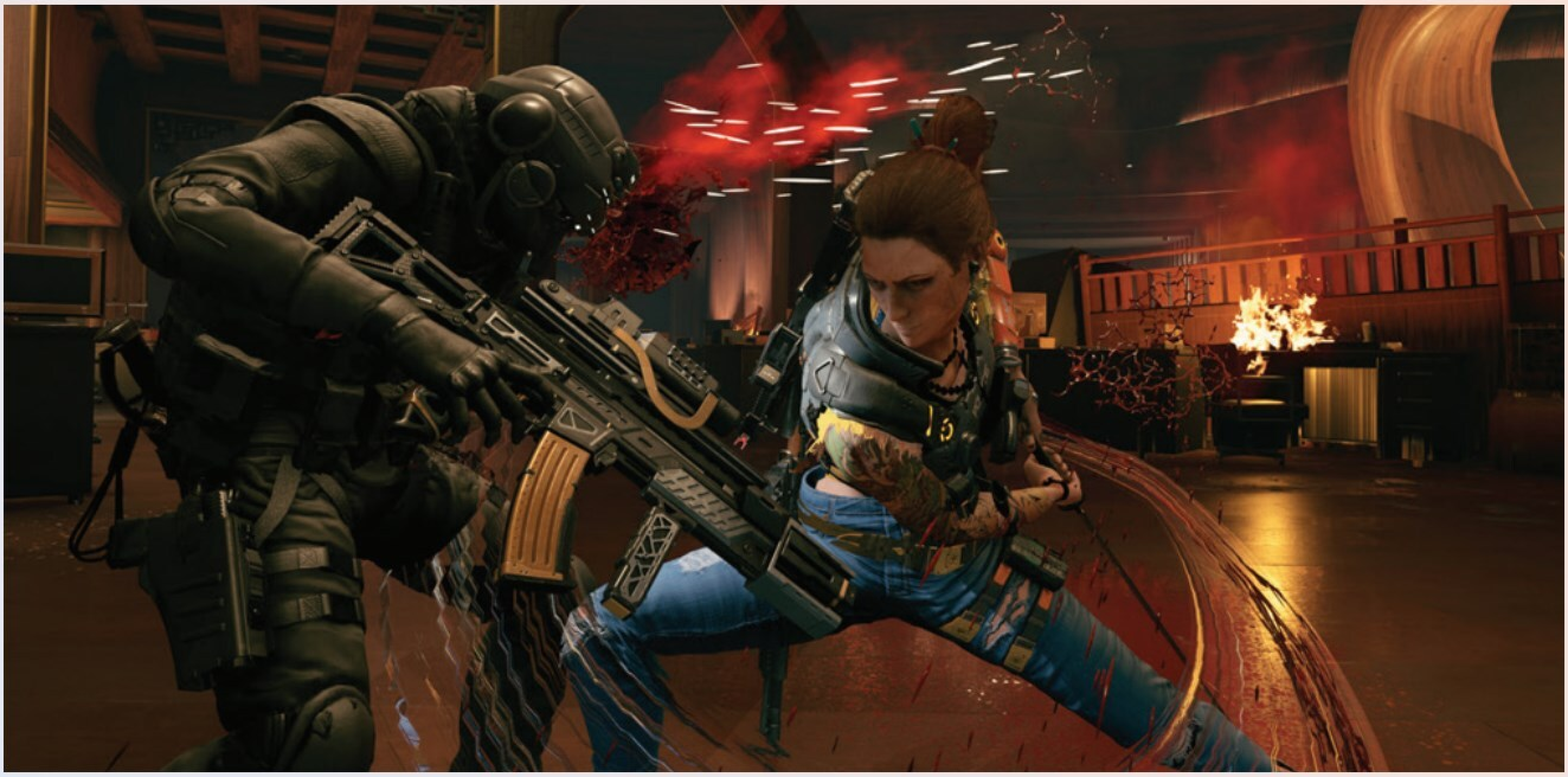
Technically, Wanted: Dead runs excellently – even in this early setting. Mechanically, it's a rote cover shooter with hack 'n' slash mechanics sprinkled on top. I spent a lot of my time running from cover to cover, popping up and down, and trading bullets with enemies who were largely doing the same. Occasionally, when I needed ammo, I'd run aggressively at a foe and slice them into ribbons.

But that was – more often than not – a risk, as leaving cover, predictably, often led to being gunned down. At least in the build I played, Wanted: Dead doesn't offer a lot of ammo, so shooting, running, and dying along the way became very familiar. That said, the hacking, and indeed the slashing, too, feels really good. There's a significant weight to strikes, and mixing in gun combat to break enemy guards is a fun addition. Unfortunately, this isn't the focus of Wanted: Dead's combat; comparatively, the cover-based shooting is far more prevalent. Hopefully later levels handle this balance better.

We only played a small slice of the game, but compared to its awesome trailers, it's hard to shake the feeling the game isn't yet delivering when it's actually in your hands. But there's something there. The hack 'n' slash combat is fun when Wanted: Dead allows you to engage with it. Hopefully, the full game leans into its strengths and smooths over some of the rough edges – and the developers might consider changing the main characters to anything other than cops, which feels especially tone-deaf due to recent events. They could be, like, literally anything else. Spies. Mercenaries. Anything.

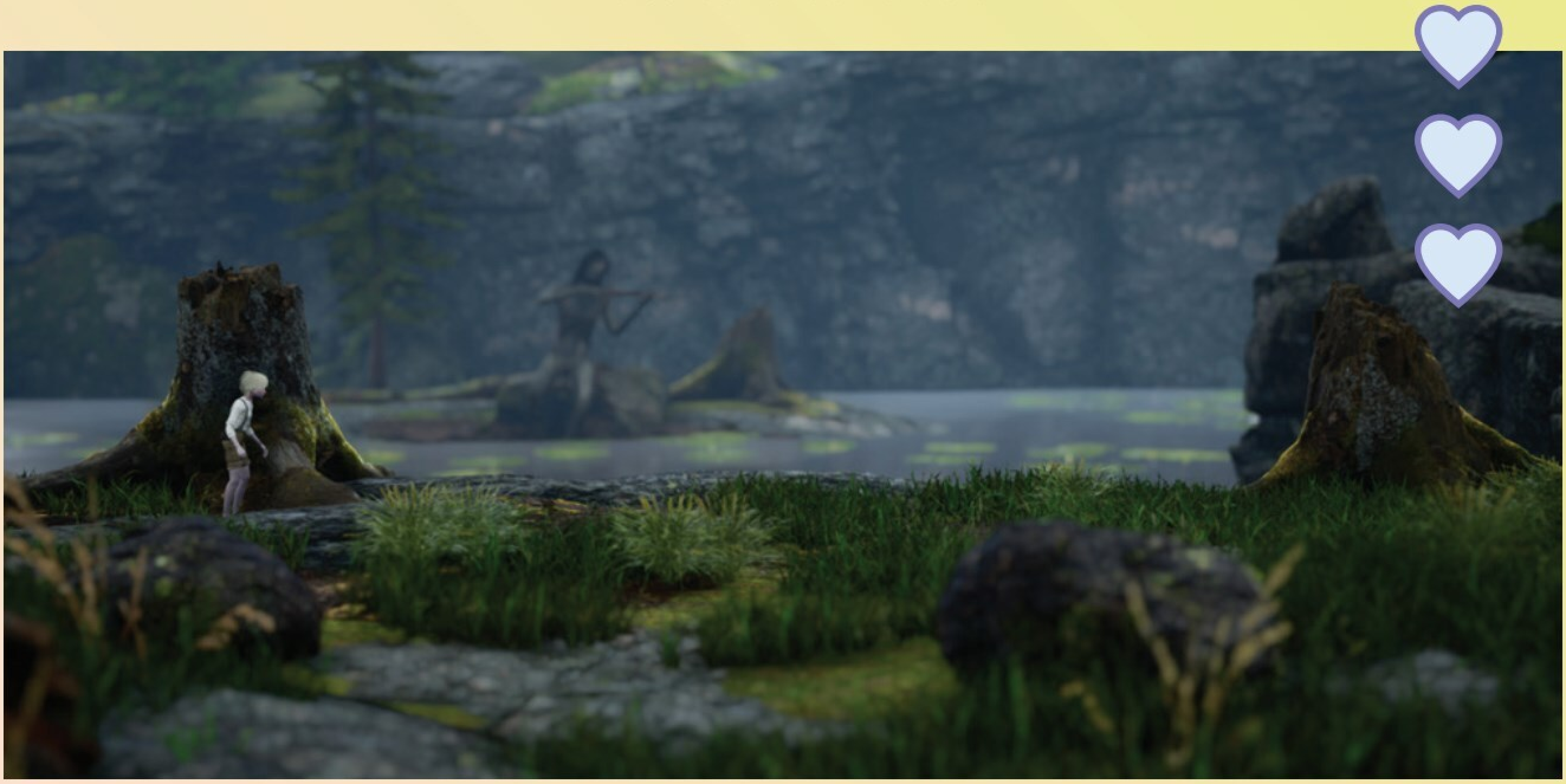
Wanted: Dead is expected this year, though Soleil hasn't given a specific release date yet. Time will tell if the entire product delivers on its strengths or falls back on its weaknesses. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** 110 Industries **DEVELOPER** Soleil Ltd.
RELEASE 2022



BRAMBLE: THE MOUNTAIN KING

The dark allure of folklore



Bramble: The Mountain King is the upcoming game from Dimfrost Studio, a development house best known for its VR exploration game A Writer And His Daughter. Motivated by the hope of rescuing his lost sister, players control a young protagonist named Olle as he explores a world of misty Nordic fairy tales and combats strange and deadly creatures along the way.

Dimfrost aims to offer a compelling juxtaposition of beautiful natural environments and sudden, horrifying moments of danger – all reflected in high-quality visuals. That goal is apparent in the game's early footage, which has an attractive and lush art style immediately capturing the mood.

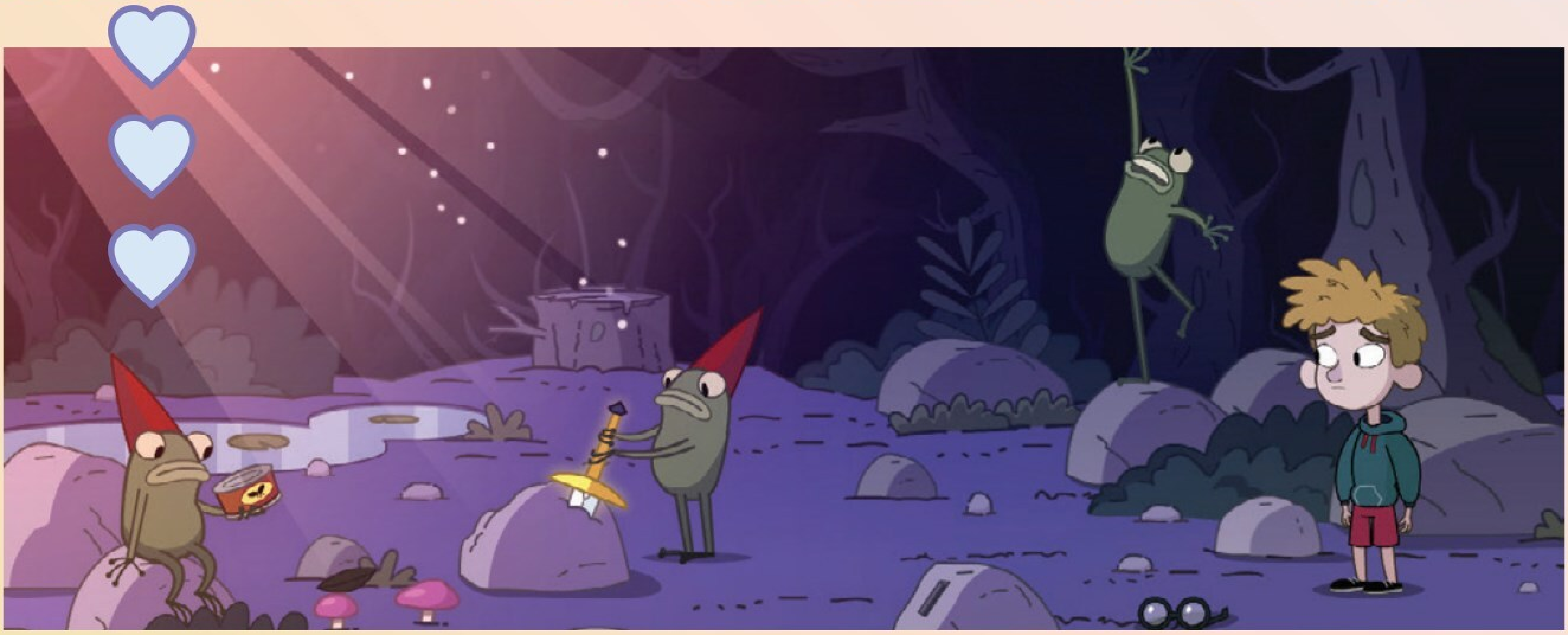
The studio describes a focus on "David vs. Goliath" bosses as you explore a foreboding wilderness. For example, the new trailer discusses the strange creature Näcken, perhaps inspired by the Scandinavian myth of the Nykr. In the game, the Näcken plays its magical violin from its watery home, luring people to their deaths by drowning in the lake. He was once an ordinary man bullied by those around him who eventually snapped and killed everyone close to him, including the girl he loved.

Based on the description explored in the trailer, it's clear that Dimfrost is interested in exploring the backstories and foundational elements of each monster's narratives as part of the unfolding game. The Näcken is just one of many strange creatures players encounter.

The footage reveals the young explorer navigating creepy 3D environments, often as imposing giant creatures lurk in the background. Gameplay is said to focus on puzzle-solving and platforming. Several sequences show Olle in uncomfortably close encounters with the creatures you'd expect to see in a child's nightmares – towering heights, twisted visages, and malevolent intentions. In other moments, environments take on a more charming style, filled with large and friendly forest animals or helpful little gnomes that follow Olle like Pikmin, eager to participate in the adventure.

To stand a chance, Olle also has access to the Spark of Courage, a small fragment of magic providing gifts to survive the dangers of the wilderness. The exact nature of that enchanted help remains unknown. We'll hopefully learn more ahead of the game's release, promised on PC and consoles sometime later this year. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM Consoles (TBA) • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Adventure
PUBLISHER Merge Games **DEVELOPER** Dimfrost Studio **RELEASE** 2022



LOST IN PLAY

Lost In Play is a point-and-click adventure full of imagination. My recent hands-on started deceptively normal, with a young girl trying to get her brother to play. This requires several clever steps, including aiding a dog to herd dream sheep. However, the game soon strays into bizarre territory, with the brother evading a monster and helping hat-wearing frogs. **BY JILL GRODT**

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Joystick Ventures **DEVELOPER** Happy Juice Games **RELEASE** August 10

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MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

Marvel's Midnight Suns is shaping up to be a massive superhero brawl. Most of Marvel's notable heroes, including Spider-Man, are trying to stop Lilith, the mother of demons, from destroying the planet. Time is of the essence, as her army grows stronger as she advances. She's even enlisted the might of Venom and Hulk, both twisted in demonic ways to become greater threats. **BY ANDREW REINER**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Strategy **PUBLISHER** 2K Games **DEVELOPER** Firaxis Games **RELEASE** October 7

WO LONG: FALLEN DYNASTY

Team Ninja, the studio behind the Nioh and Ninja Gaiden series, is back with another action-packed dark fantasy adventure. The team is taking players to China's Three Kingdoms Period, specifically during the Later Han Dynasty. You play as a nameless militia soldier who fights against humans and demons with Chinese martial arts. It will be released sometime in early 2023. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Koei Tecmo Games **DEVELOPER** Team Ninja, Koei Tecmo Games **RELEASE** Early 2023

FINAL FANTASY XVI

Role-playing games often empower you as the world's savior, with a gift capable of eliminating great evil. Final Fantasy XVI's story toys with this idea, showing protagonist Clive Rosfield confident and ready to inherit the Phoenix's power. But the magical gift never arrives. It instead touches bonds with his "frail and bookish" brother Joshua. He has the power to save the world, and it appears you'll have to help him find confidence. **BY ANDREW REINER**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix **RELEASE** Summer 2023

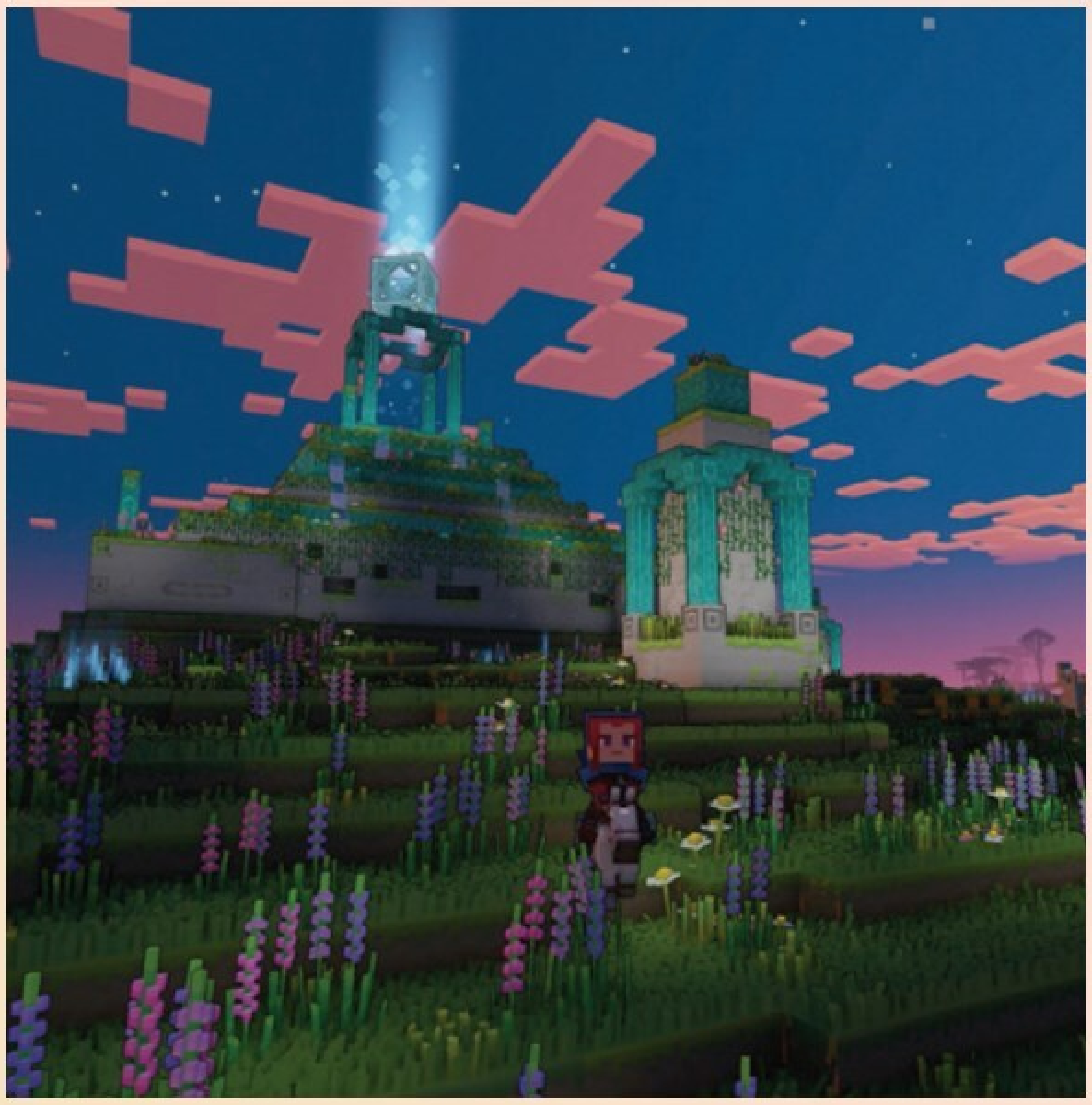
MINECRAFT LEGENDS

The legend on the block

Minecraft Legends looks like a vibrant and exciting new take on the traditional Minecraft formula. All the blockiness of Minecraft is present, as are familiar mobs like Villagers. However, its combat system is a drastic departure from anything else Mojang has developed. Ditching the real-time action combat of Minecraft, and its isometric counterpart featured in Minecraft Dungeons, Legends features strategy gameplay. How that plays out has not yet been detailed, but developer Mojang says players will lead allies in heroic battles to defend the Overworld.

And speaking of that Overworld, as you'd expect, there are plenty of lush biomes with rich resources. However, it is on the brink of terrible change due to a piglin invasion corrupting everything. It's up to you, unexpected allies, including classic Minecraft mobs, and some online co-op buddies, to find out what's going on. Mojang also says it will feature competitive multiplayer as well, but the team will share more on that at a later date.

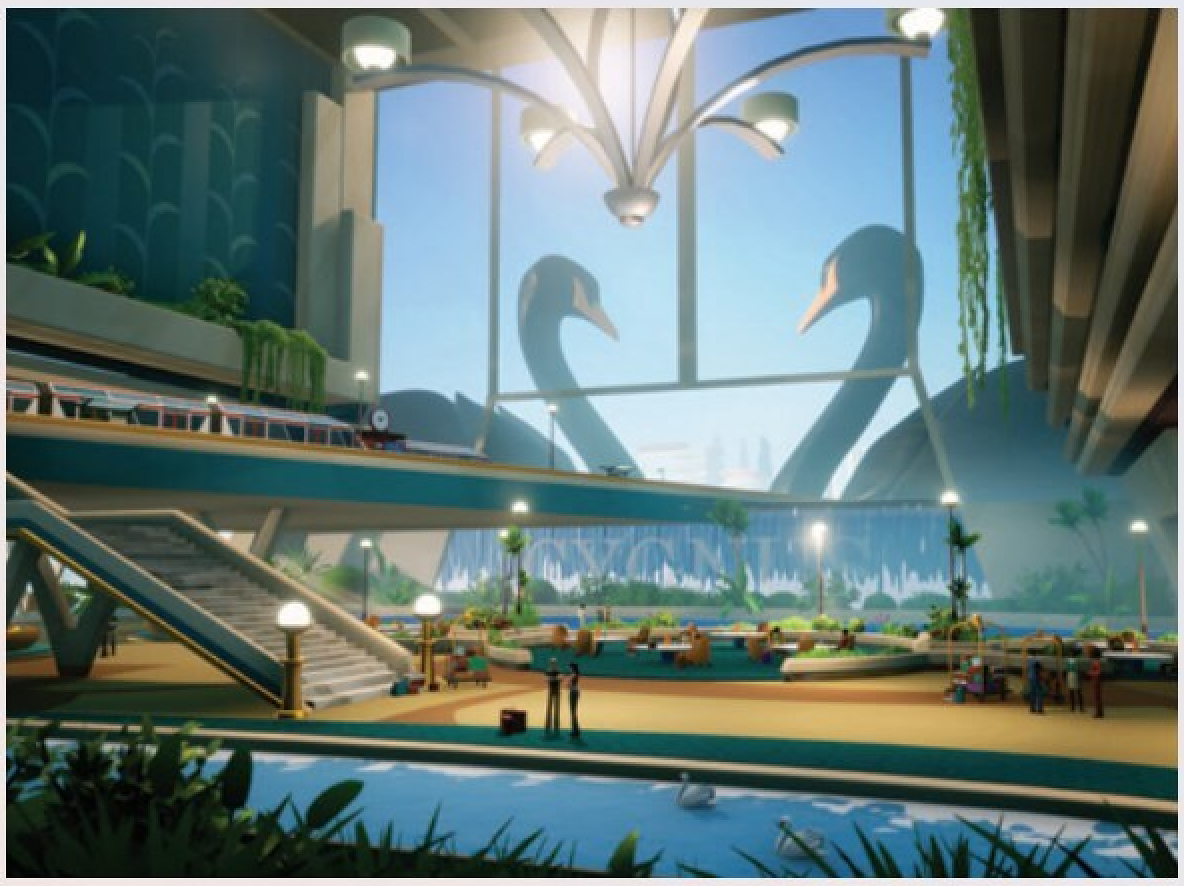
Mojang has the world of Minecraft covered, but strategy is a new genre for the team, which is why it partnered with Blackbird Interactive, a team with a long history of strategy experience. Together, the two plan to bring a new brand of action-strategy to the mega-popular Minecraft universe, and the teams are doing it with a unique art style. Blending Minecraft's traditional visual style with cell shading, Legends appears to be the poppiest and most colorful version of this world yet. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**



PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Strategy (Online TBA) **PUBLISHER** Xbox Game Studios
DEVELOPER Mojang, Blackbird Interactive **RELEASE** 2023

AMERICAN ARCADIA

The dangers of reality



Developer Out of the Blue, creator of Call of the Sea, is guided by an interest in "worlds that are striking, visually appealing, and evocative," according to art director Daniel Nombela. Those guiding principles were present in the studio's earlier project and remain apparent in the forthcoming American Arcadia, albeit in an entirely new style.

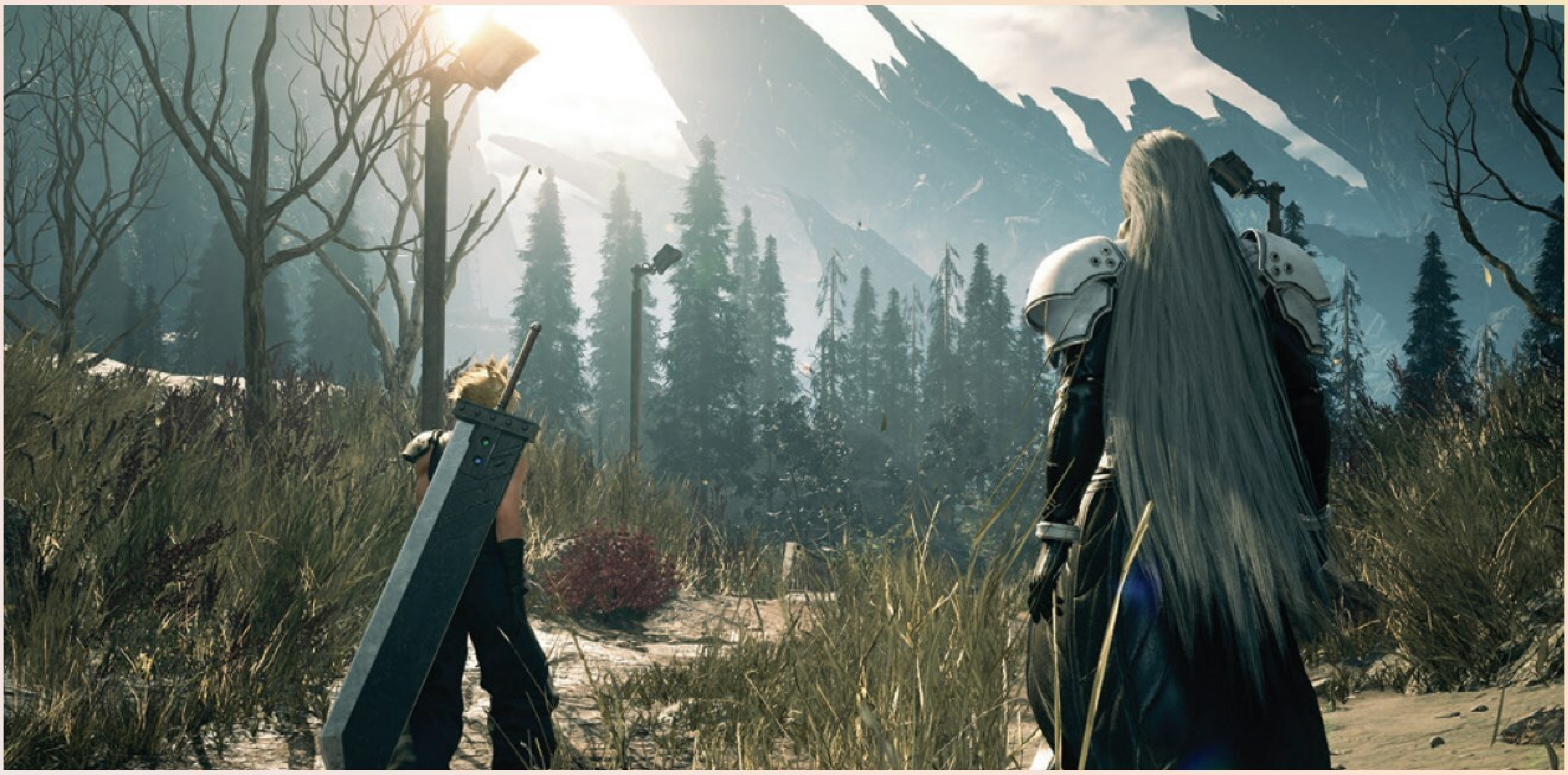
In this story of reality TV gone wrong, players control Trevor Hills, a resident of a strange city called Arcadia, a futuristic utopia (rooted in 1970s design sensibility) in which everything looks clean and progressive. However, the city's pristine appearance is an illusion, as the entire thing is a TV show for people on the outside, in which one's popularity can tank and put their life at risk.

Trevor is on the run from the constant surveillance, leading to what looks like several frantic chase scenes. In one, floating drones track and record his movements. In another, we see Trevor running from security as they try to take him in. And in yet another, he makes a death-defying leap from a high dive platform into a pool far below.

While most of the action we've seen focuses on these third-person sequences, the game has a second gameplay loop. Angela Solano is a technician working on the show, and her efforts to aid Trevor play out in first-person moments of hacking, puzzles, and other challenges.

American Arcadia draws inspiration from the classic film *The Truman Show*. But the added 1970s aesthetic and focus on man-on-the-run action gives it a unique vibe. Plus, satirizing or commenting on the questionable values of reality TV certainly feels like a timely subject, suggesting that the project may have something interesting to say when it releases on console and PC. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM Consoles (TBA) • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Adventure **PUBLISHER** Raw Fury
DEVELOPER Out of the Blue **RELEASE** TBA



FINAL FANTASY VII: REBIRTH

The middle chapter

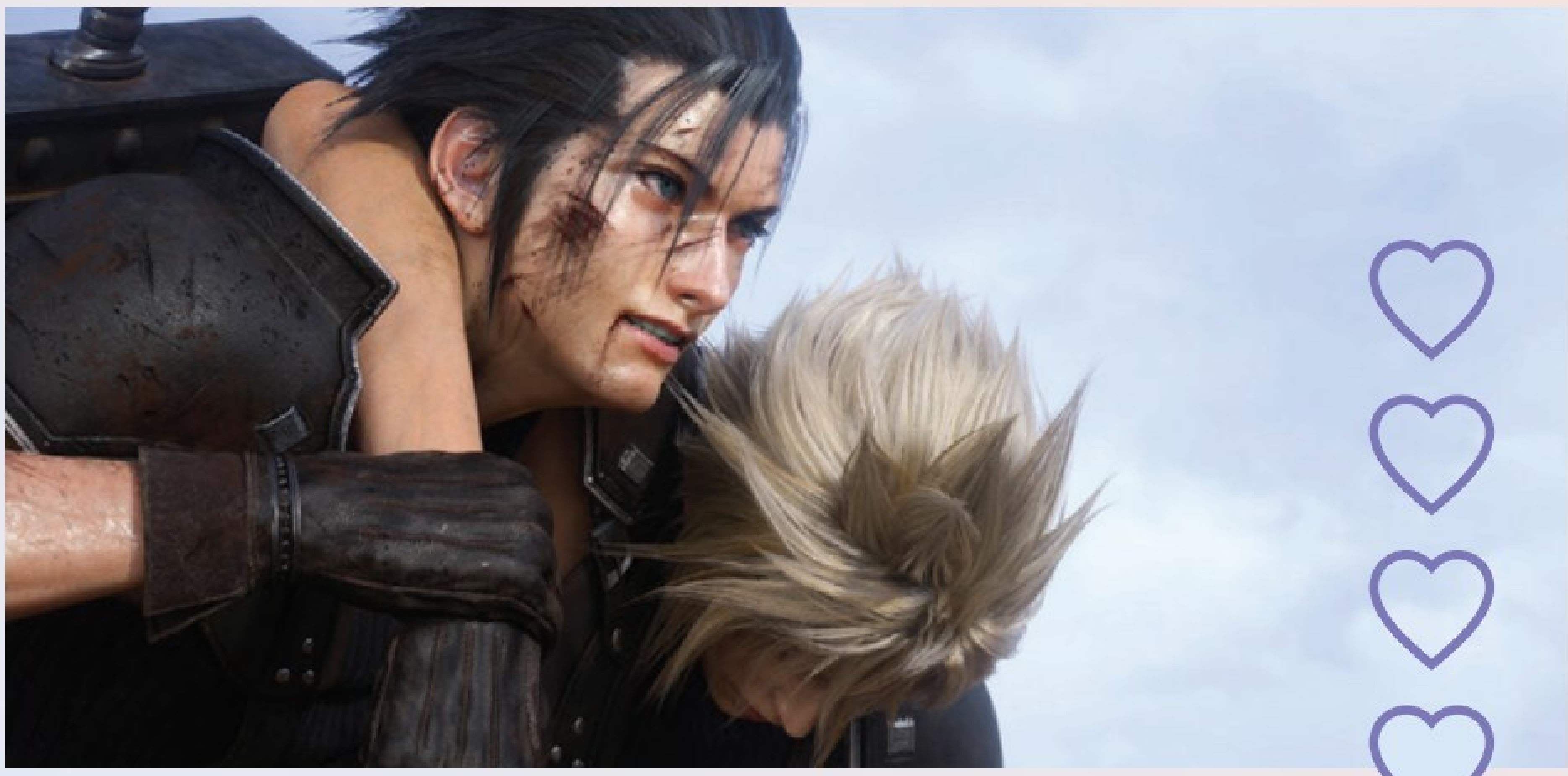
Final Fantasy VII: Remake had a number of surprises when it came out in 2020, but few as impactful as its ending. Consider that your spoiler warning. Players already knew at the time that the game would focus squarely on the events in Midgar in the original game, but the final hours provided several new insights. Most importantly, we received the implication that Remake's story is actually an alternate timeline, in which events may not be set along the same path we recall from the original game.

That powerful nugget of information informs our first look at the sequel. Final Fantasy VII: Rebirth is positioned as the middle chapter of a larger trilogy – meaning Square Enix is already planning, and even beginning work on, the third major installment. Related projects will further flesh out those three core games, including the newly announced Crisis Core – Final Fantasy VII – Reunion game, which remasters the original PSP Crisis Core title focused on the character Zack.

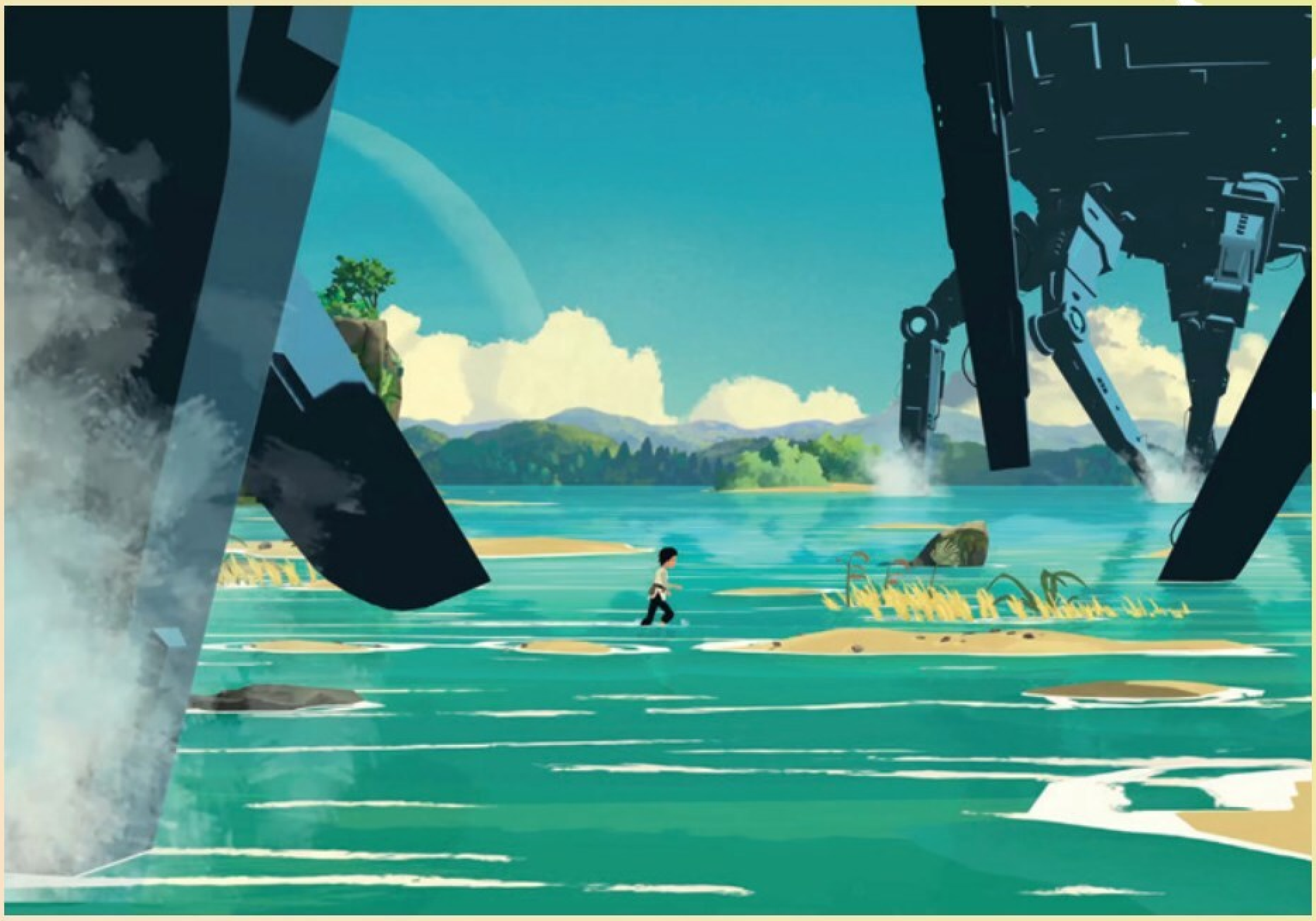
As for Rebirth itself, Square Enix is keeping things enigmatic. In the first-look trailer, we see a sequence of Cloud walking alongside Sephiroth, as well as one in which Zack helps carry an injured Cloud. Both strongly suggest that at least a portion of Rebirth may take us back into events prior to the Midgar crises seen in Remake and delve further into the mysteries of Cloud's past. But at the same time, voiceover sequences seem tied to the modern group of friends, including Aerith and Tifa, leading to questions about what is changing in this version of the timeline.

Rebirth has the potential to expand in some exciting new directions. While I have little doubt that many of the most memorable original post-Midgar sequences will make an appearance, it remains to be seen how much this divergent timeline allows for new encounters. Whether that will result in the same outcomes or if any out-of-context snowboarding involved? That's anyone's guess.

BY MATT MILLER



PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix **RELEASE** Winter 2023



PLANET OF LANA

Scenic sci-fi

Finally, we have the information everyone interested in Planet of Lana has been waiting for: you can pet the protagonist's cat-like companion, Mui. But that's not the only new information, and we gleaned a lot from the game's latest showing.

A brand-new trailer for the cinematic puzzle adventure showed off several beautiful biomes, more gameplay, and a deeper look at the world's dangers. The opening shot again highlights how stunning Planet of Lana is. Impressionistic clouds hang over sparkling blue waters, framing a looming, Death Star-like threat. In the foreground, our heroes Lana and Mui gaze at the danger on the horizon from their safe perch. But while the visuals are eye-catching, the new gameplay is the big star.

Lana runs through verdant forests, arid deserts, and dense swamps in the first few seconds, giving players a taste of the game's diverse landscapes. The focus then shifts to give fans a look at the action, something we haven't seen much of since its debut last year.

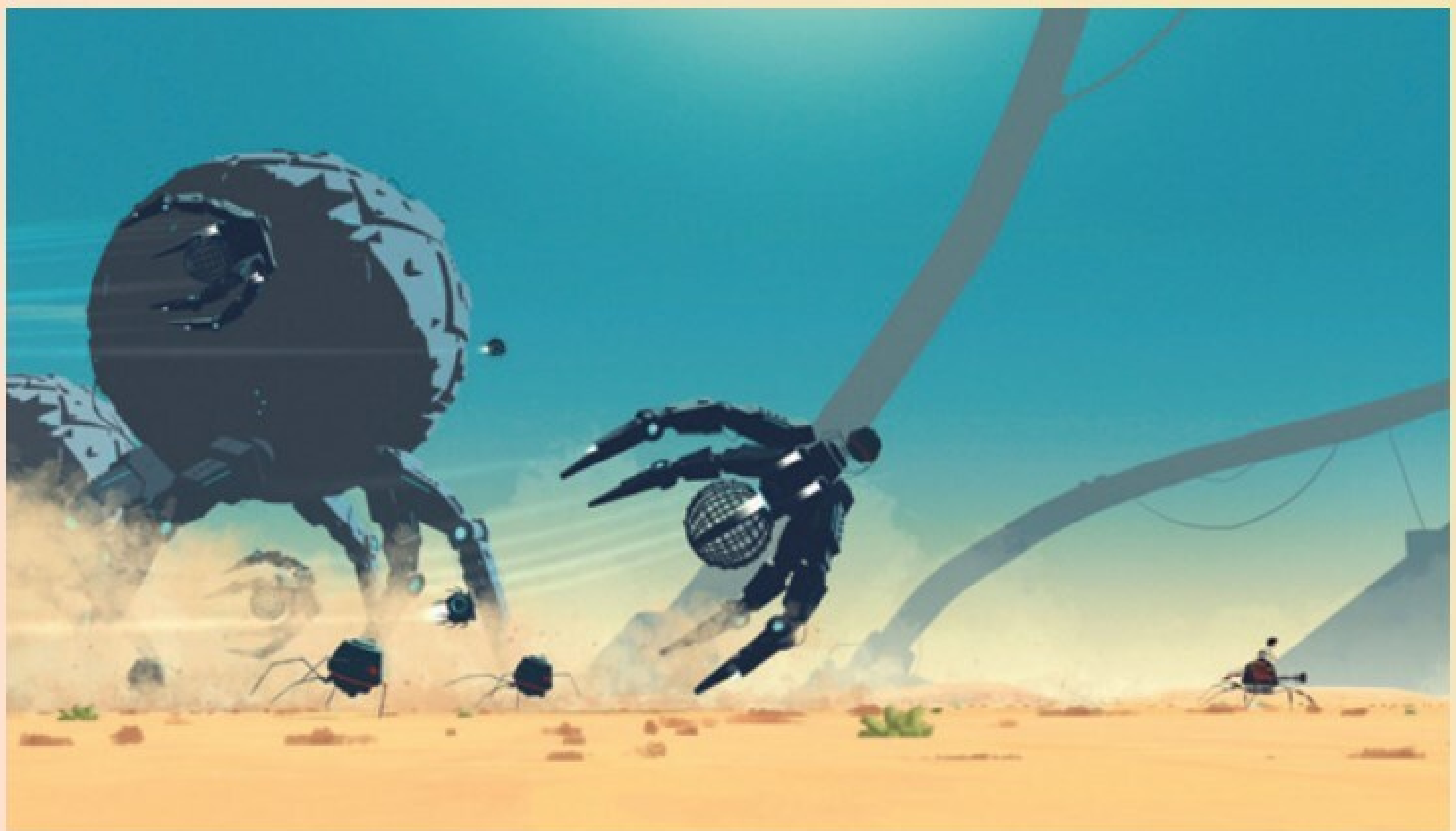
First up, the footage details how Lana navigates puzzles with Mui's help. Directing the obliging creature towards a stake in the ground, she instructs Mui to sever a rope that holds up a drawbridge. Once Lana crosses, day changes to night. The footage cuts to Lana stealthing through tall grass, avoiding a flying drone's watchful spotlight. While this kind of puzzle-solving, combat-avoidant gameplay may not be novel, another intriguing part of the trailer promises a more distinctive experience and illustrates that there is much more to Mui than meets the eye.

While outwardly cuddly and helpless looking, the portly black creature displays odd powers throughout the video. Hearing Lana's call, Mui stares deeply into the eyes of other dark figures. Its eyes glow, sending out a shimmering light. This action seems to mesmerize the target, forcing it to do what the player wants. In one case, this glowing mind trick results in water filling a once-depleted lagoon so Lana can swim across. In another, Mui's illuminating stare prompts an oversized worm-like creature to move from its sheltered spot.

Looking closely, it's possible to see Lana holding a small orb that glows whenever Mui activates this vision-based ability. Perhaps this is where the power comes from, and the implications are intriguing. It's also curious that each controllable creature has the same hue as Mui. Though the creators have not explained either of these points, your helpful buddy may be an alien entity compelled in some way to help protect Lana's world.

Puzzles, platforming, and picturesque panoramas all seem to be major elements. And though there will be no direct combat, that doesn't mean Planet of Lana will be short on action. The last section of the trailer shows Lana catching a high-speed ride on the back of a long-legged, mechanical beast. We also see the traveling duo sail uncomfortably close to an underwater mammoth and weave between the legs of lumbering machines so tall we can't see their heads on screen.

Despite being more than halfway through the year, we still only have a vague 2022 release window. However, when the game is released, players can pick it up on Xbox consoles and PC. **BY JILL GRODT**



PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Thunderful Publishing
DEVELOPER Wishfully **RELEASE** 2022

LAYERS OF FEARS

A terrifying reimagining

Amidst rumors it's making a Silent Hill game, it turns out that Bloober Team's next project is a new entry in the Layers of Fear series, aptly called Layers of Fears. Bloober has also tapped Anshar Studios to help. The team says it is a "psychological horror chronicle built upon the foundation of the original Layers of Fear, Layers of Fear: Inheritance, and Layers of Fear 2." Bloober Team says "the psychedelic experience fans know and love will include an expanded plotline and gameplay direction all created in Unreal Engine 5."

The Dawn of Ragnarök is the centerpiece of that ongoing rollout, a major new expansion set to be released in late winter, adding a considerable chunk of new missions, environments, and even new gameplay-altering character powers.

That speaks to the game's new visuals, which are markedly better than the graphics of previous Layers of Fear games. The reveal trailer, which seems mostly CG, hints it might not necessarily be a direct sequel to Layers of Fear 2 or even the first game. Instead, Layers of Fears might be a unique reimagining that blends the experiences from those two previous games.

The first followed an artist set on creating his magnum opus. In doing so, he's driven to madness, eventually resulting in his wife's death, which haunts him throughout the game. In Layers of Fear 2, you control an actor aboard a seemingly abandoned ship that is much more than what it seems to the naked eye. Bloober Team is diving back in to retell these stories in a new way.

"We are bringing back a franchise that is really special for us, in a new form that will give players a truly fresh gaming experience and that will shed new light on the overall story," Bloober Team CEO Piotr Babieno said after the reveal of Layers of Fears. "Our plan was to recreate the games, but we didn't want to make it a simple collection of two remastered games. We've worked out a new approach, something that is maybe not yet obvious. But I can tell you there's a reason we called it Layers of Fears."

The Layers of Fears reveal trailer features scenes that appear to be from both Layers of Fear and Layers of Fear 2, and it seems to hint that we might be learning more about the artist's wife in the first game. Maybe we'll even control her instead of her artist husband.

"They say it's a tale of sadness and guilt of an artist trapped in a place beyond redemption," she says in the trailer. "It's a lie. This is a story of my fear, pain, and hatred of the horror of my loneliness, and it is mine to tell."

Elsewhere in the trailer, there are shots of the boat from Layers of Fear 2, but how the studio will intertwine the two stories, if at all, in Layers of Fears remains unknown. Regardless, the imagery of the Layers of Fears reveal trailer looks terrifying, and if you're into horror, it seems like a game you don't want to miss. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Bloober Team SA
DEVELOPER Bloober Team, Anshar Studios **RELEASE** 2023

HIGH ON LIFE

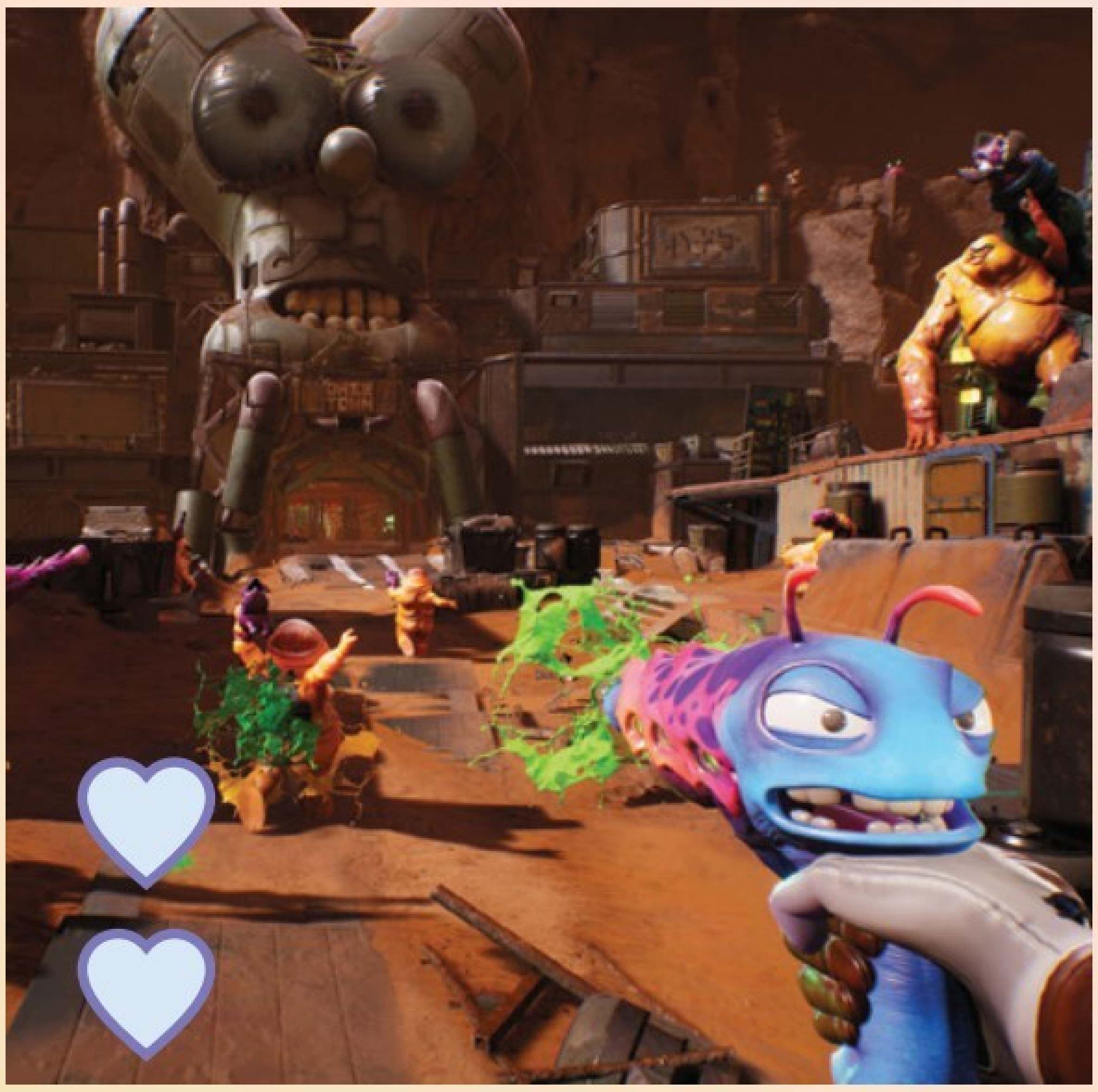
Hey, that gun sounds familiar

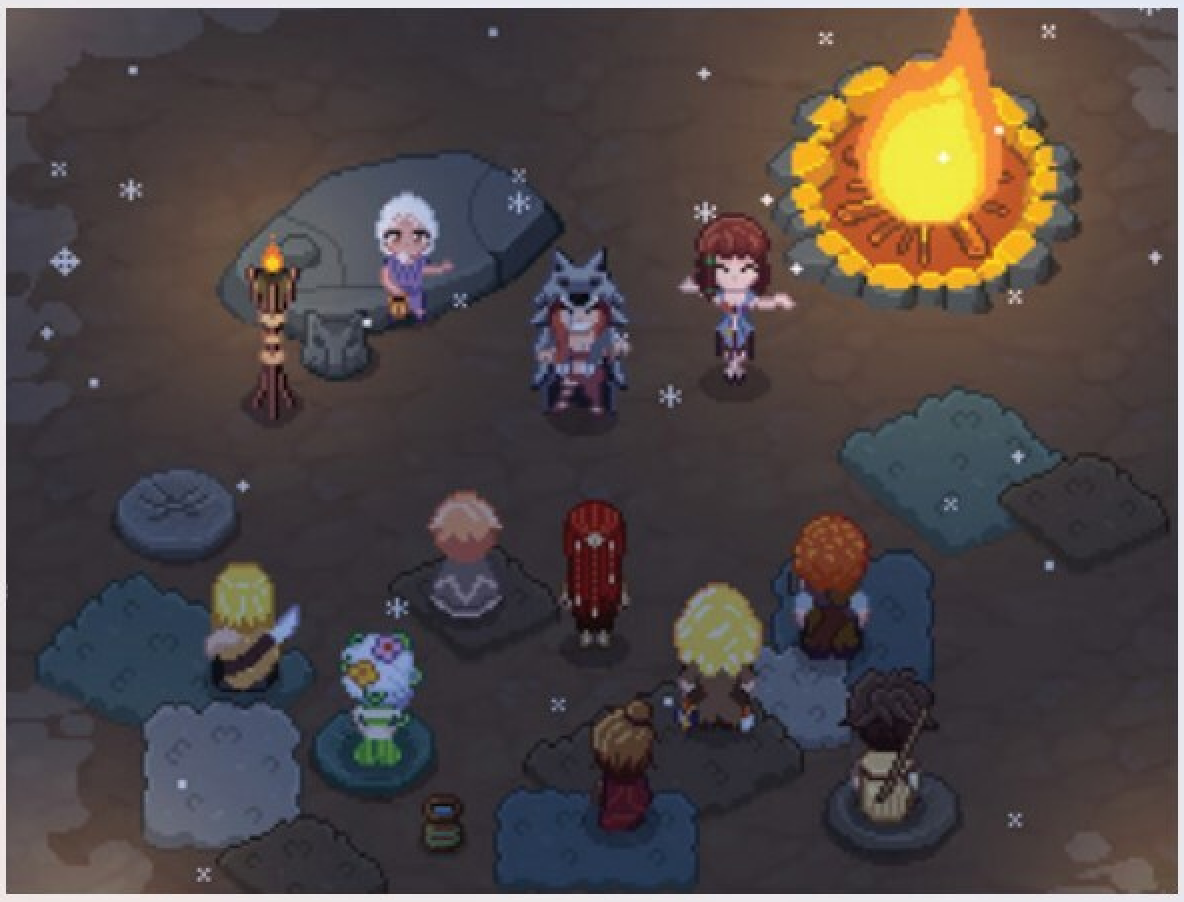
The next game from Squanch Games, the studio behind Trover Saves The Universe and Accounting+, is High On Life. If you're familiar with the team's work, it's likely one you don't want to miss. That's because High On Life is the first-person shooter baby of Rick and Morty creator Justin Roiland. And as you'd expect, it features all the zaniness, humor, and probably belches Roiland's brand has become known for; plus, it has talking guns.

The pitch alone is incredible: you're a bounty hunter whose sole mission is to stop an alien invasion on Earth. These aliens are searching for drugs, and by drugs, I mean humans. That's because, in High On Life, aliens have discovered a way to use humans as drugs. To stop them, you'll need to use special talking guns that also happen to be sentient life forms from another planet. Each weapon has a distinct personality, and from what we can gather in the reveal trailer, the voice cast includes Roiland himself and J.B. Smoove, whom you might recognize as the host of Grand Theft Auto V's Chakra Attack.

When you're not shooting down alien drug cartel members, you'll be meeting strange beings, recovering valuable resources, and soaking up the atmosphere of various beautiful alien worlds. The visual style of High On Life is as bombastic as the game's pitch, and it looks terrific. Assuming Squanch Games has wrapped all this into a very Roiland story, it could end up being one of the funniest games of the year. Since its reveal, Roiland has revealed that High On Life is an "absolute dream game that we were kind of building towards this whole time." I can't wait to check it out in a few months. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Squanch Games **DEVELOPER** Squanch Games **RELEASE** October 25





ROOTS OF PACHA

Stone Age Valley

Fans of Stardew Valley should prepare to travel back in time in Roots of Pacha. The pseudo-Stone Age life sim makes imagined prehistory your sandbox as you work to ensure your clan continues to thrive. I recently went hands-on with this "inspired by humanity" adventure and was struck by how much players will have to do in its world.

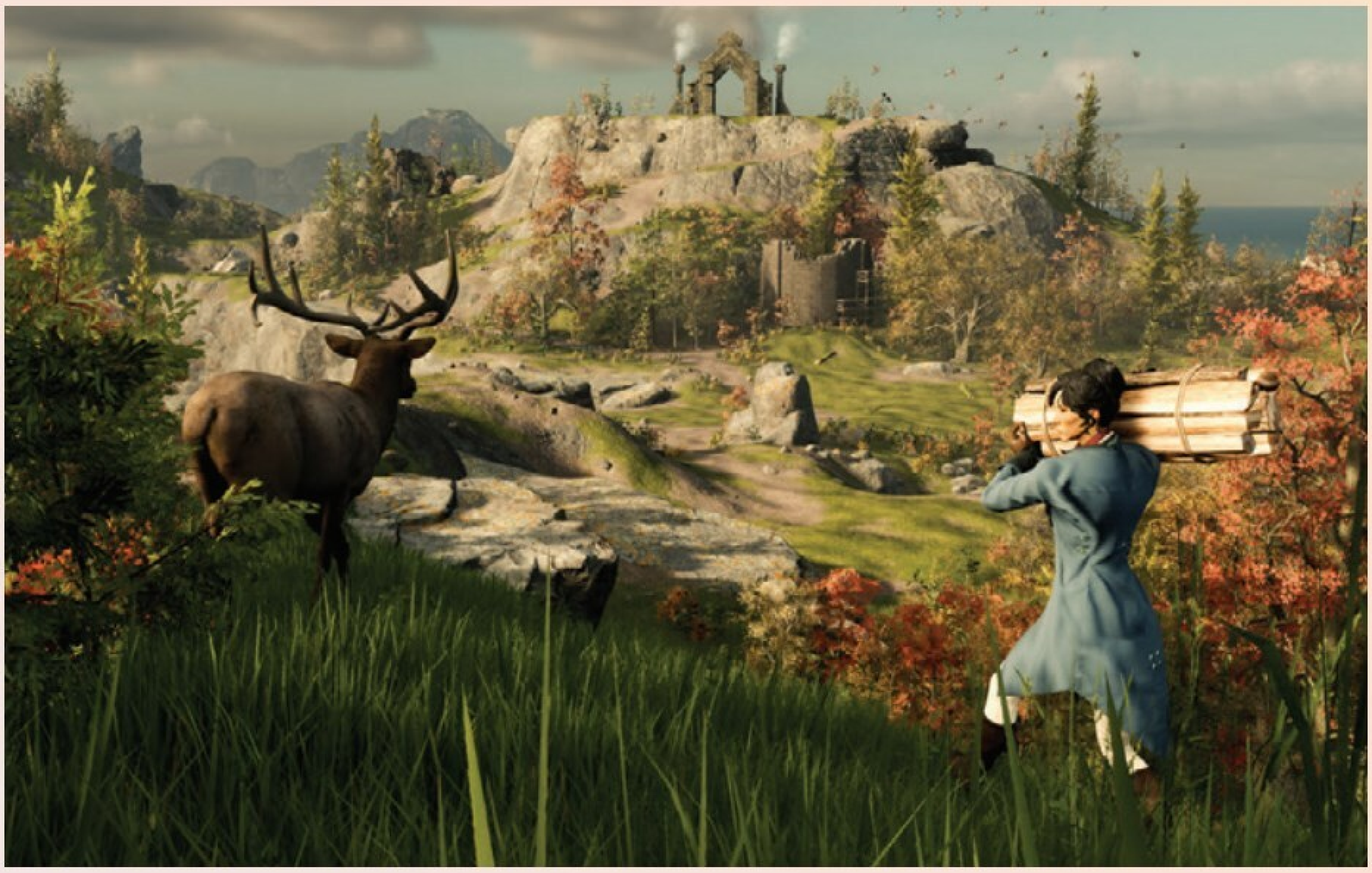
The demo begins with an in-depth character creator and an origin myth explaining how the tribe traveled months to find the venerated Pacha tree that marks the site of their new home. Now settled, I start receiving quests, including "The First To Farm" and "Animal Friendship."

Both help me figure out the general mechanics and breadth of experiences. Anyone acquainted with Stardew will quickly catch on to the first quest. I must clear a large field choked with weeds, logs, and stone to begin planting crops – an unfamiliar task for the Paleolithic-inspired characters.

The game's animal-centric quest is a little more novel. It tasks me to travel into the forest to play the flute for any creature that will listen. This action triggers a small timing-based minigame which determines how much it trusts me. By hitting notes at the right time, then giving the animal gifts later, I begin befriending the forest's residents.

Of course, there is plenty to do back at camp. Like with the animals, I strengthen my bond with my various fellow tribe members, giving gifts and making time to chat to increase my friendship levels. Some give me new tasks, like collecting a certain amount of stones to build a sundial – another radical invention. The short demo didn't let me see everything the game offers, but eventually, players will begin to develop the tribe's way of life by crafting new tools, erecting innovative structures, and allowing groundbreaking art to flourish. **BY JILL GRODT**

PLATFORM Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Simulation (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Crytivo
DEVELOPER Soda Den **RELEASE** 2022



NIGHTINGALE

Singing an intricate tune

Nightingale is a bewildering mix of concepts. Players jump into the rich world with friends or alone as if it were a single-player experience, but the shared world concept means it always retains some aspect of multiplayer. However, the meat of the conflict doesn't come from other players, as in some online games. Nightingale focuses on PvE, challenging players to work together against whatever the game throws at them. And the title's open-world structure leaves a lot of opportunities for challenge. As a survival game, one of the hurdles will be simply surviving and finding materials to craft everything from your basic needs to cool designs. Toss in a few mystical portals, multi-dimensional travel, and explorable fantasy realms, and you have Nightingale's general idea sketched out.

To condense that down a bit, Nightingale is a first-person, open-world, multiplayer-friendly action survival game with Victorian-era aesthetics and fantasy elements. The narrative conceit that allows all these disparate parts to fit seamlessly into one game is intriguing. You'll play as a Realmwalker, a person capable of traversing a tangled system of arcane gateways granting access to different worlds. Unfortunately, a devastating event severed the ancient paths, leaving you stranded in the strange and dangerous Faewilds. Now you're cut off from humanity's last stronghold, the magical city of Nightingale. The unexpected crisis leaves many Realmwalkers helpless without tools and supplies. It's up to the players to find a way back while crafting everything necessary to survive the perilous wilderness.

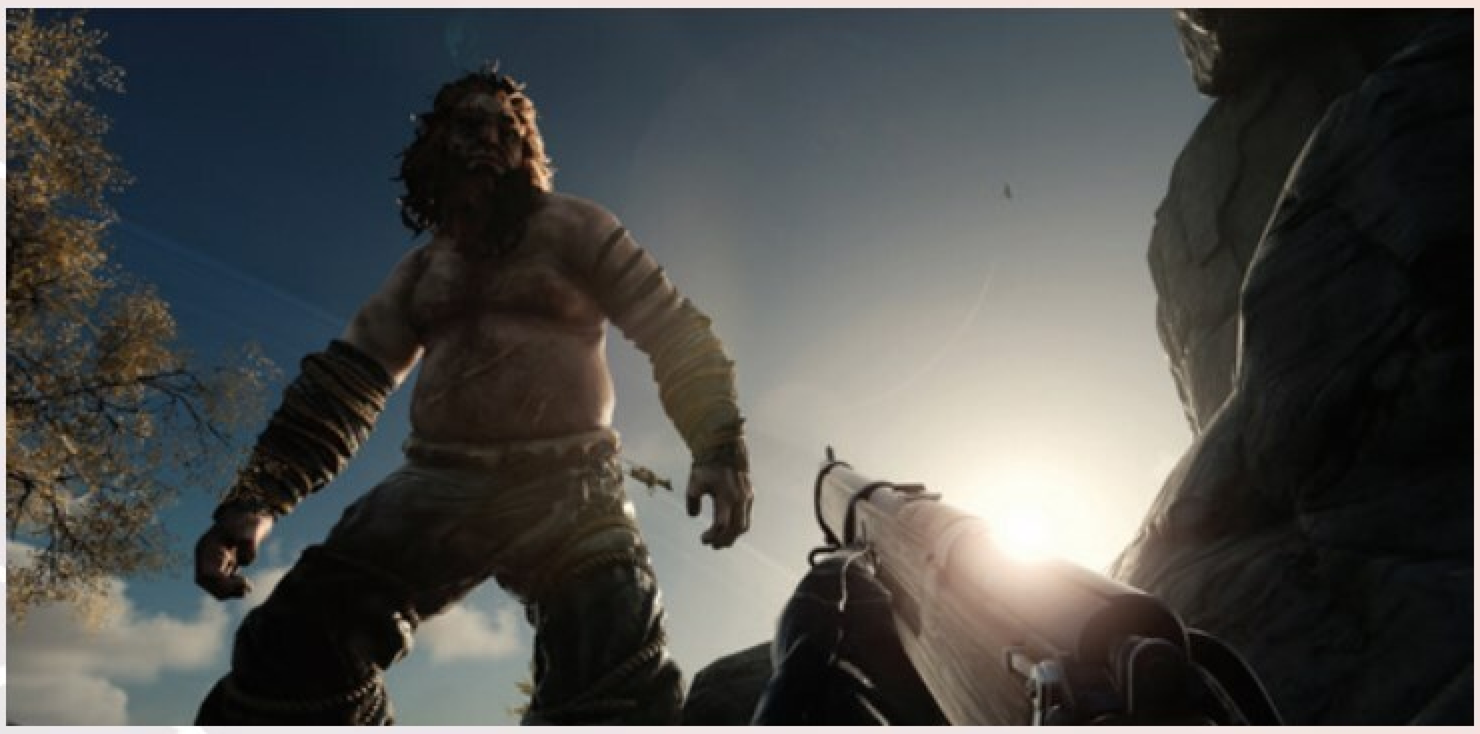
This mission sends players through the Faewild's diverse biospheres, including jungles, deserts, swamps, and forests. By collecting resources, you'll construct tools, weapons, and technologies to help with cooking, building, and defending yourself. That last objective will be vital because the Faewilds harbor a barrage of deadly creatures. No place is safe as human-like foes called the Bound attempt to ransack your home. And vicious predators stalk the surrounding environment. Some of these are so large that players must team up to bring down the hulking threats.

If the game didn't already have enough elements, our most recent look at Nightingale detailed one more mechanic: Realm Cards. These powerful artifacts allow players to activate malfunctioning portals, but it won't be easy.

"Opening a portal in Nightingale is no small feat, and to transition an inert portal arch into an active gateway to another realm, you'll need to provide direction and focus using Realm Cards," says senior system designer Alexei Pepers in a blog post. "Exploring the realms and acquiring magickal ingredients will allow you to learn recipes and craft new Realm Cards, and when you're ready for adventure, you will select a limited number of cards to play in combination. This combination is what will dial you in to which [...] of the many possible realms within the Fae universe you are heading to next."

Nightingale is currently a PC-exclusive coming to Steam and the Epic Games Store, and there are plenty of reasons to keep an eye on it. Besides the game's appealing graphics, "Gaslamp" style, and distinctive concept, Nightingale has some familiar faces behind the scenes. A large portion of the team at Inflexion Games is made up of former BioWare developers. Though this project differs from their past games, the group's experience makes Nightingale a title we'll be watching out for when it launches in Early Access sometime later this year. **BY JILL GRODT**

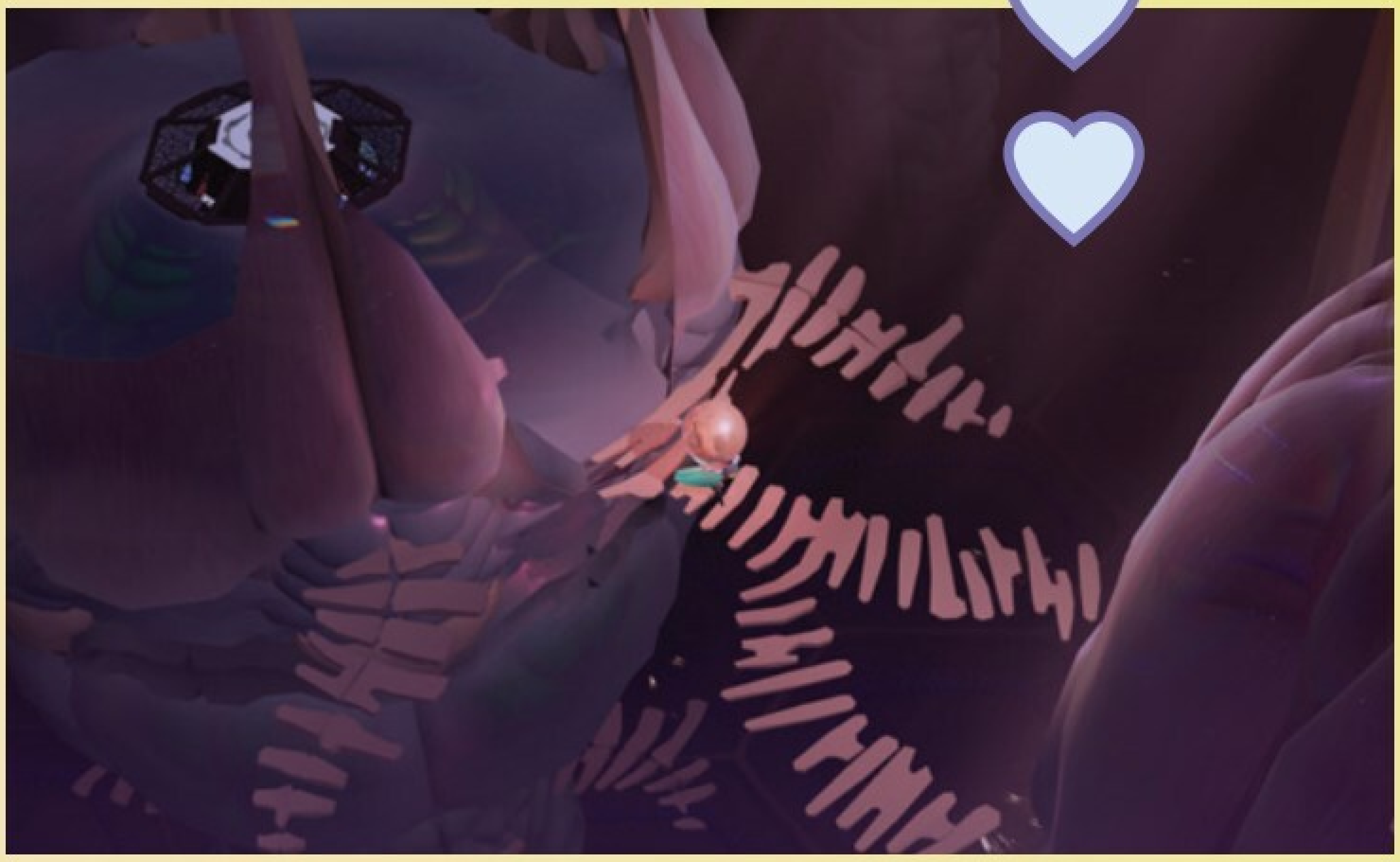
PLATFORM PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (Multiplayer Online)
PUBLISHER Inflexion Games
DEVELOPER Inflexion Games
RELEASE TBA (Q4 2022 Early Access)



COCOON

Worlds in the palm of your hand

A vast desert landscape – sweeping, stylized, and tranquil – greets our eyes. It is not a desolate scene. Though blanketed by monotonous sand, the environment boasts towering natural formations, flecks of green life, intriguingly uniform structures, and a black and purple balloon bobbing peacefully in the breeze. This last object, so startlingly different from its surroundings, is the first hint that something unusual is happening in Cocoon.



The next clue comes swiftly from a blinding white beam of light. Like a falling star, the light streaks out of the sky, hitting one of the rocky red towers. However, instead of shattering, the organic-seeming stone catches the beam, funneling its radiant energy downward via purposefully carved grooves. It's clear that the pillar is not natural but rather some device. After the streaks of illumination weave down and around some alien designs, it strikes a sphere, triggering interlocking metal scales to shudder and unfurl.

Cocoon's protagonist plops out. The tiny beetle-like creature drops from its incubator onto the hot desert sand and stands ready for action.

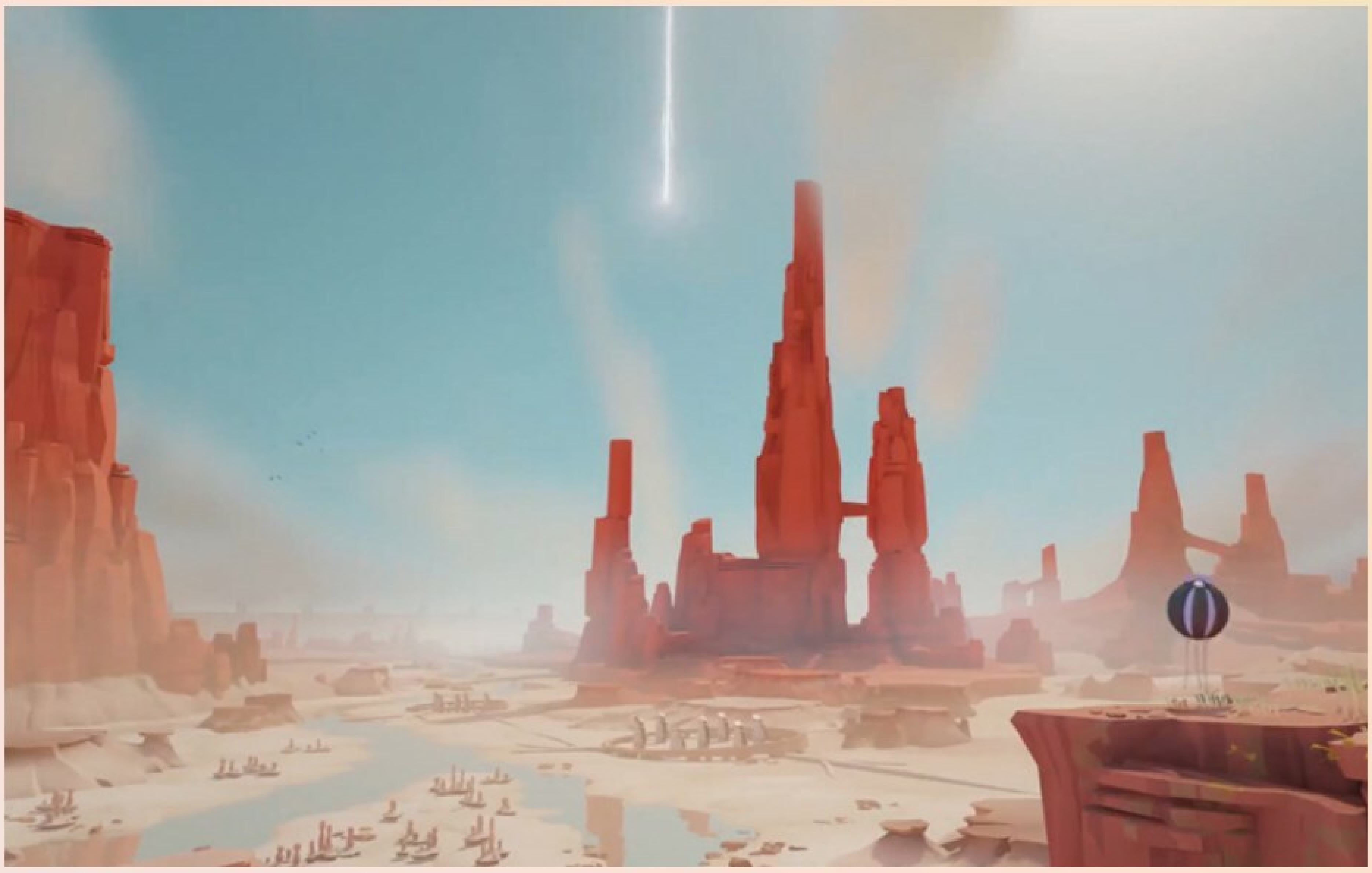
What that action will be is uncertain. The reveal trailer shows the pint-sized hero trudging through various rooms filled with futuristic technology while carrying glowing orbs on its back. The globes appear to hold environments inside them, and in one scene, the protagonist dives into one, landing in a new world. Developer Geometric Interactive's website highlights four main pillars: worlds within worlds, alien machinery, orb abilities, and monstrous guardians.

The development team seeks to set Cocoon apart from other puzzle adventure games, revealing that the thrust of gameplay primarily involves navigating hurdles by correctly manipulating the orbs and placing them within the unusual surroundings. Something similar can be said of many puzzle-like games, but Geometric Interactive injects a dose of mind-bending sci-fi, as the globes you carry around each contain a new reality and powers to unlock.

Every world, from mechanized stations to natural locales, is also dotted with technology long abandoned by a mysterious civilization. Part of the game's narrative involves figuring out why. This won't be easy, however. There are deadly sentinels hidden in every new location. We don't know exactly what they protect, but ferocious foes guard it. This dilemma means you'll have to learn techniques from the orbs to survive your encounters.

Cocoon is still in early development, and we don't have much to go on to understand the game's moment-to-moment action. But even without knowing much about it, the talent behind this title commands attention. Publisher Annapurna Interactive has a long line of accomplished games, including Kentucky Route Zero, Solar Ash, and The Outer Wilds.

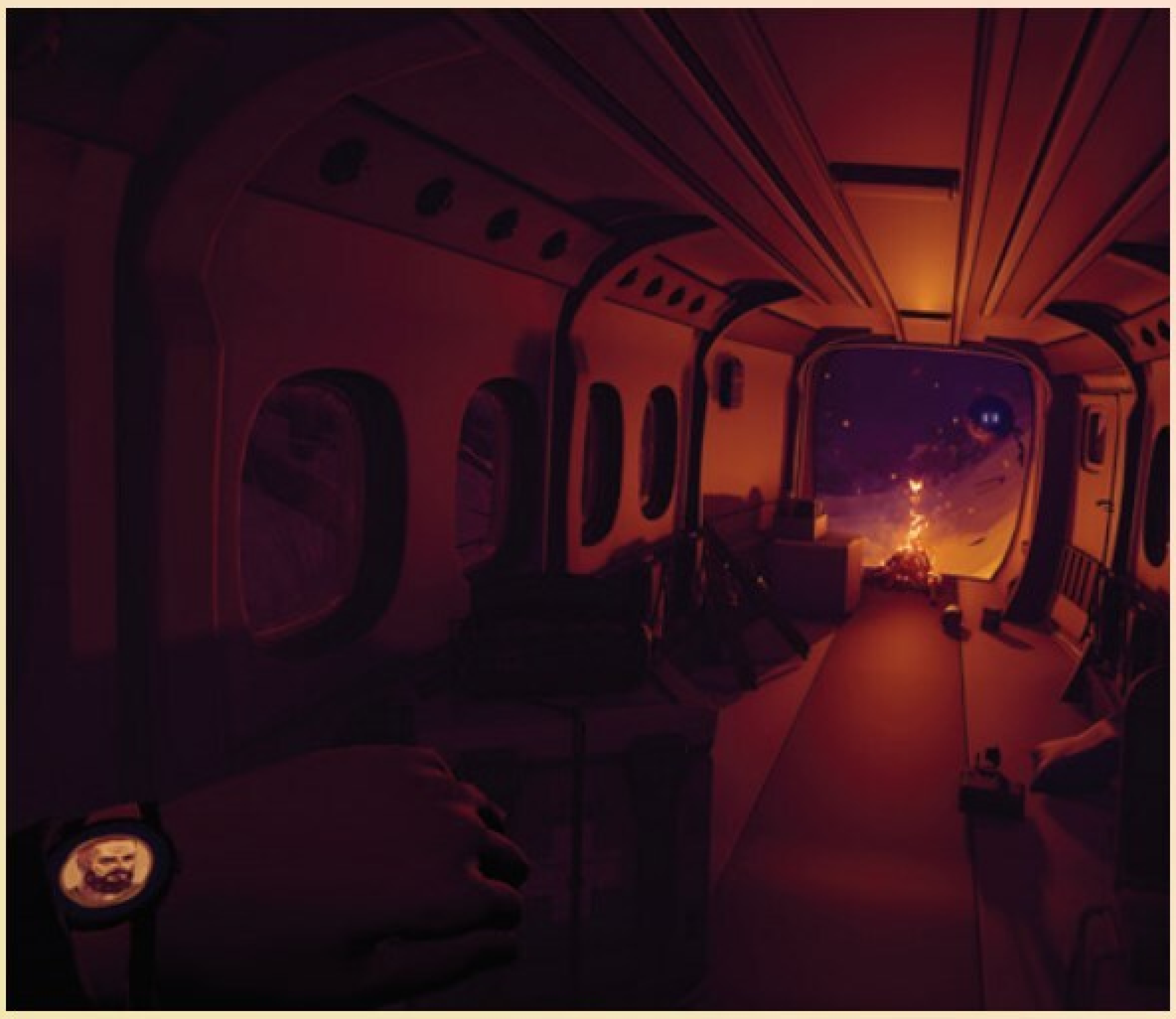
Arguably, the most exciting name attached to this project is Jeppe Carlsen. Before serving as co-founder and CEO of Geometric Interactive, Carlsen was a lead game designer at Playdead, working on the hauntingly beautiful Limbo and thought-provoking Inside. **BY JILL GRODT**



PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle/Adventure
PUBLISHER Annapurna Interactive
DEVELOPER Geometric Interactive
RELEASE 2023

ARCTIC AWAKENING

A cold crash



Your cargo plane has gone down in the frigid north. Your co-pilot is lost, you have no idea why your plane was torn in two, and you have few means of survival. You have a floating robotic companion, but his only skill set is as a court-mandated therapy bot. Things aren't looking great.

That's the setup for Goldfire Studios' new project, Arctic Awakening, a first-person exploration adventure game set against the backdrop of unbearable cold, snow, and ice. Players navigate the lead character, Kai, as he searches for his co-pilot, Donovan. However, he begins to discover that there are far greater mysteries in the wastes, including a wealth of technology and structures that may have had something to do with why his plane ruptured.

The environment is a constant threat. Goldfire is promising dynamic weather that shifts over time, meaning even areas you've visited may be different when you return a second time. The game is also set in 2062, so things are different than in a modern-day setting, including your only companion, Alfie. As a floating companion bot, the little drone doesn't seem to have much to offer in the way of help for your adventure, but he's prominent in the story.

Beyond exploration elements, Arctic Awakening focuses on narrative choice and the way those choices shift the relationships and situations of the characters around you. The decisions you make also affect the way the game ends.

Arctic Awakening will be released as five distinct chapters, roughly 60-90 minutes apiece. Your chance to adventure in the frozen wilderness begins in 2023, with releases on PC and unannounced consoles. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM Consoles (TBA) • PC • Mac
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Goldfire Studios
DEVELOPER Goldfire Studios **RELEASE** 2023

INKBOUND

A mishmash of genre favorites

Inkbound is the next game from Monster Train developer Shiny Shoe, and it mixes some of the most exciting genres in video games, such as action RPG, tactics, and roguelike. It looks great, too, blending dark fantasy and folklore-ish storytelling into an adventure that's unique from player to player. Inkbound appears to riff on the idea of creating stories and how, if left unfinished, they can fall apart.

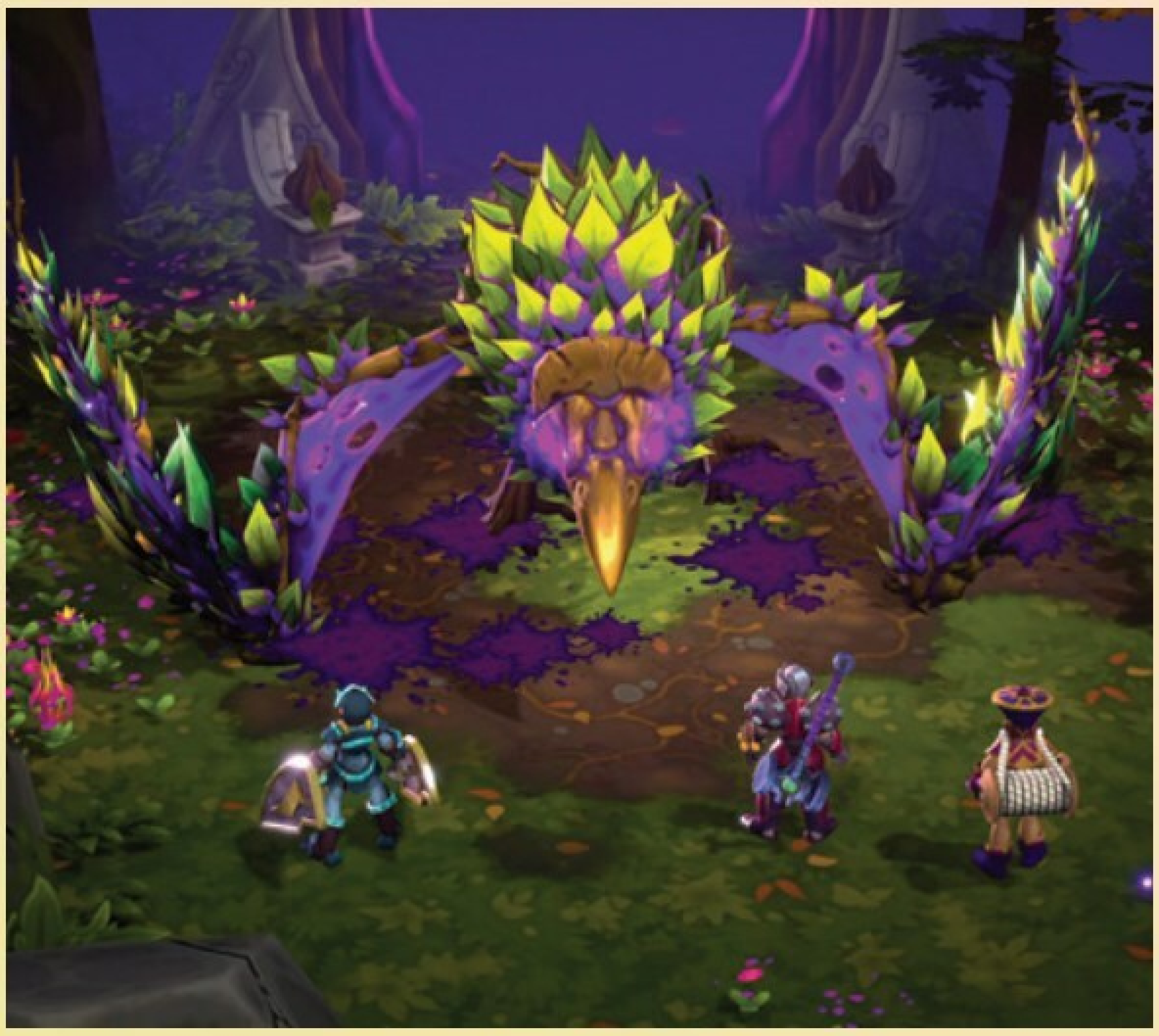
This plays into its roguelike nature. In roguelikes, you die (or fail) repeatedly. In Inkbound, each death can be considered you leaving a story unfinished.

"Inkbound takes players on a journey through procedurally generated storybook worlds, battling monsters that are set on unraveling the nature of reality itself," Shiny Shoe said after revealing Inkbound's debut trailer. "Players can dive in solo or party up via online co-op in hybrid real-time/turn-based encounters. All the while, heroes become more powerful the deeper they progress in each roguelike run."

Inkbound takes place in The Atheneum, which contains all the written stories of the world. Anything written in ink can become real, including nightmare carnivals, ancient ruins accompanied by volcanic destruction, and more. Players control Binders, characters charged with maintaining these stories that can go anywhere at any time so long as someone or something has written it in ink. Shiny Shoe says combat turns are "snappy and quick, but players can slow down and take time to fully evaluate their current threats." You can choose optimal times to rush enemies for big melee strikes or better position yourself for ranged attacks.

Inkbound goes into Early Access on PC via Steam sometime in 2023. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Shiny Shoe
DEVELOPER Shiny Shoe **RELEASE** TBA (Early Access 2023)



OVERWATCH 2

Blizzard pulls back the curtain on its free-to-play model

Blizzard recently re-revealed Overwatch 2 with monumental changes, including a free-to-play model, decoupled PvE and PvP pillars, and a seasonal live-service structure that sets an ambitious schedule for new content over the next several years.

The competitive multiplayer suite will launch on October 4 through early access across all platforms. When it does, it will include the game's new 5v5 structure (changed from Overwatch 1's 6v6 gameplay), a new mode called Push, three new heroes (Sojourn, Junker Queen, and an as-of-yet unannounced support hero), six new maps, a Mythic skin (which changes colors), and more than 30 new skins. It also starts a nine-week seasonal structure promising new maps and cosmetics each season and a new hero every other season.

"We've changed a lot with the game," game director Aaron Keller says. "Our PvP plays differently than it did before. We've gone to a 5v5 format, removed a tank from each team, we've reworked (in some form) over half the heroes in the roster. The gameplay is more fluid and dynamic while still maintaining what I feel is the magic of what makes Overwatch gameplay sing."

At the start of season 2, which begins on December 2, players can expect a new tank hero, a new map, 30 or more additional skins, another Mythic skin, and a new battle pass. This trend will continue into 2023, with Blizzard committing to more heroes, maps, modes, and more than 100 other skins that calendar year.

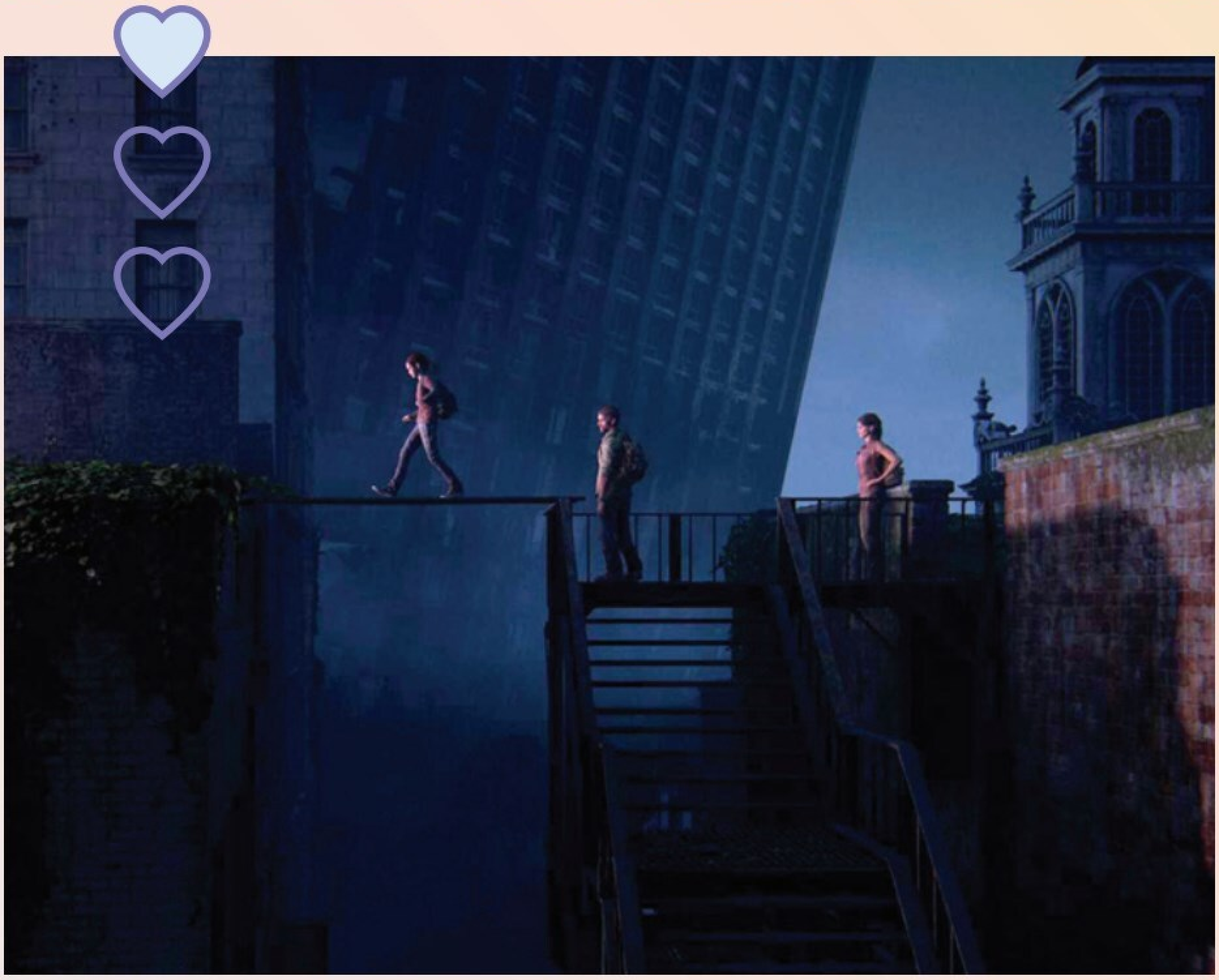
Beyond season 2, Blizzard says it's already working on heroes that extend into the next year and a half. We glimpsed a few heroes at some point in the story, while others have never been seen. All the new heroes are designed with the lessons of the first game in mind, plus the knowledge that the new multiplayer plays faster and with fewer shields than the original.

Several components carry over from the first Overwatch, but one essential part has been removed entirely: loot boxes. Blizzard knows the frustration of opening a box full of duplicates, and it understands players want more control over how they unlock additional cosmetics. We saw that at the end of the first game's lifespan, as the team gave special objectives with clear paths to unlock specific skins. Now, players unlock new cosmetics through the game's battle pass, weekly challenges, in-game store, and more.

Once the PvE launches in 2023, Overwatch 2 will offer new ways to enjoy the heroes and story of this science-fiction universe. Characters feature different movesets and abilities. The narrative is set to move the overall canon of the universe forward, telling the story of how Overwatch gets back together with a combination of the old guard and young blood. The PvE gives players looks at other parts of the universe they've only heard about to this point, such as Torbjörn's factory. The hope is that these missions, where you battle against Null Sector, allow you to bring your squad from PvP into a PvE experience and immerse yourself in the world of Overwatch a bit longer.

It's been a long time coming for Overwatch 2, originally announced in 2019, but through this new seasonal structure and the team's ambitious content plans, it seems it could be worth the wait. After the beta in late June, I'm even more excited to jump back into my favorite multiplayer shooter. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 10-Player Online Shooter **PUBLISHER** Activision Blizzard **DEVELOPER** Blizzard
RELEASE October 4 (Early Access)



THE LAST OF US PART I

A fresh coat of blood

The heavily rumored remake of The Last of Us is real, and it's out this September. Its new name, The Last of Us Part I, aligns perfectly with Naughty Dog's 2020 hit, The Last of Us Part II. Part I comes bundled with the Left Behind prequel DLC. With Part II, this altogether makes up the entirety of The Last of Us story as it stands today.

Both Left Behind and the original title have been remade "from the ground up," according to developer Naughty Dog. And Part I's debut trailer showcases how good this game looks thanks to the new-gen enhancements. Ellie and Joel, the two main characters you control in Part I, look stunningly realistic – even better than they did in Part II. The NPCs they encounter and tag along with, such as Tess, look better as well. The Last of Us director Neil Druckmann calls Part I the definitive version of the game, and by the new visuals, it certainly appears to be just that.

"We wanted to give people the definitive version of the first game that wasn't encumbered by any technology," Druckmann said in an interview with Summer Game Fest host Geoff Keighley. "We wanted to find a way to get even closer to our original vision, and we're able to do that on the PS5 and PC."

Naughty Dog took the original animations it created for the faces of characters like Joel, Ellie, and others and "retargeted" them to new animation rigs with higher fidelity.

"The great thing about these faces is that they're closer to what you did on set than what we could have achieved before," Druckmann told Part I actors Troy Baker, who voices Joel, and Ashley Johnson, who voices Ellie.

It's not just the in-game faces that look better, though. The art director for The Last of Us even returned to redirect art for Part I. Plus, Part I will feature all-new AI. That's great news, because my 2020 replay of The Last of Us Remastered highlighted the original game's aging AI. Additionally, "the combat is redone," according to Druckmann. Hopefully, this means it's closer to Part II's offering, which featured markedly better stealth and cover mechanics, a more brutal melee system, and even a dodge button.

On top of all this, Part I will run at 60 frames per second, or at least will have a 60 FPS mode, which means the gameplay should feel smoother than ever, all while looking better.

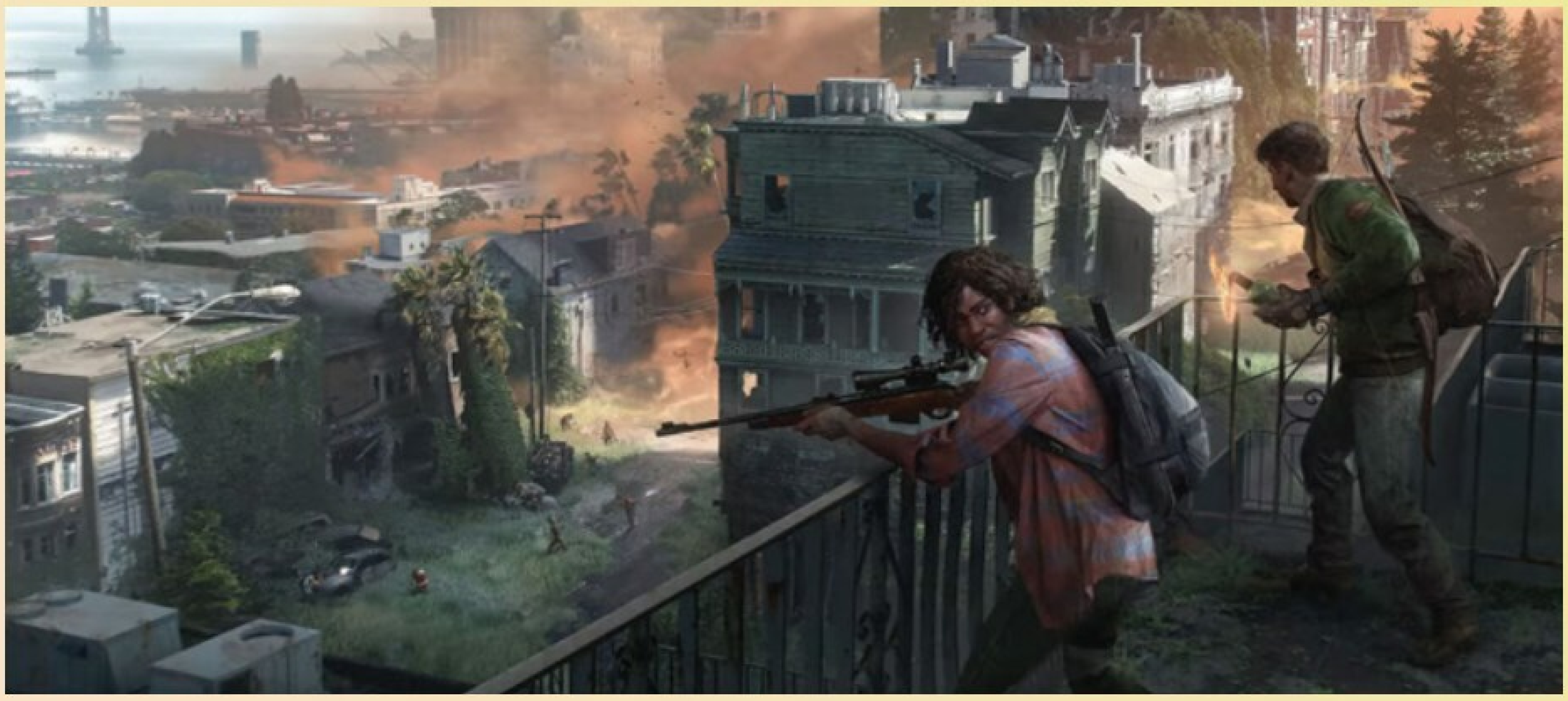
Some commentators have expressed the feeling that Sony charging $69.99 for Part I is too steep of a price tag. And on the visual fidelity side, some fans have said they don't see enough improvement in Part I's graphics to justify that price, while others think Part I looks significantly better. There are plenty of side-by-side screenshots and videos out there, and they're worth checking out if only to see the differences between the original game, The Last of Us Remastered, and Part I.

Regardless of where you fall, we're just a few months away from being able to witness all the graphical improvements and gameplay-related updates on console. The PC version doesn't yet have a release date, but Naughty Dog says it is actively in development. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER Naughty Dog **RELEASE** September 2

THE LAST OF US MULTIPLAYER

A new standalone experience



On September 26, 2019, Naughty Dog revealed The Last of Us Part 2 wouldn't be getting a multiplayer mode. As production on the single-player game ramped up and became Naughty Dog's most ambitious project, the team delayed the multiplayer experience indefinitely.

After finishing development, the focus shifted back to the project, which is now a standalone game. The Last of Us director and Naughty Dog co-president Neil Druckmann says it is "as big as any of our single-player games we've done, and in some ways, bigger."

Druckmann also revealed it features a new story. The singular piece of concept art revealed so far shows two characters standing on a rooftop that appears to be overlooking San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. "The way we are telling that story is very unique," adds Druckmann. Given the new location, we wouldn't expect many returning characters. The concept art could potentially reveal two of its major players.

The unnamed project is spearheaded by Uncharted and The Last of Us veterans and sadly doesn't have a release timeframe. My guess is late 2023 but seeing that the project has already been in the works for years, it could surprise us and come sooner. **BY ANDREW REINER**

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 **STYLE** TBA
PUBLISHER Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER Naughty Dog **RELEASE** TBA

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REDFALL

Painting the town red

In Redfall, developer Arkane Studios melds its expertise in level design and open-ended gameplay with the co-op shooter template of games like Left 4 Dead. It doesn't seem like the developer's wheelhouse on paper, but we're beginning to believe it can pull this off.

The game unfolds in the titular Redfall, a postcard-worthy island town off the coast of Massachusetts. The idyllic village becomes shrouded in darkness thanks to a mysterious eclipse that causes its surrounding waters to dry up, trapping its citizens. If that wasn't bad enough, vampires appear and wreak havoc. Some survivors have gone into hiding, but the more twisted members of Redfall's population become violent cultists worshipping these night creatures and attacking non-believers.

As bleak as the situation appears, four heroes rise to take a stand. First up is Layla Ellison, a biomedical engineer gifted with telekinetic powers. Remi de la Rosa is the team's mechanical genius, accompanied by a small robotic companion. Jacob Boyer is ex-military and an expert marksman. Lastly, inventor and cryptid enthusiast Devinder Crousley comes packing his own custom-made weaponry. Characters level up, learn new skills, and utilize scientific and supernatural weaponry.

Firearms include rifles and shotguns (each with randomized stats) and tools geared towards vampire-hunting, such as a UV beam and a gun that fires stakes. Each character also sports individual talents. Jacob can send his pet raven to scout areas while Layla can create telekinetic objects, such as shields and an elevator that sends allies airborn. In classic Arkane fashion, players can tackle situations in several ways, whether that be guns-blazing, quiet and stealthy, or a combination of both.

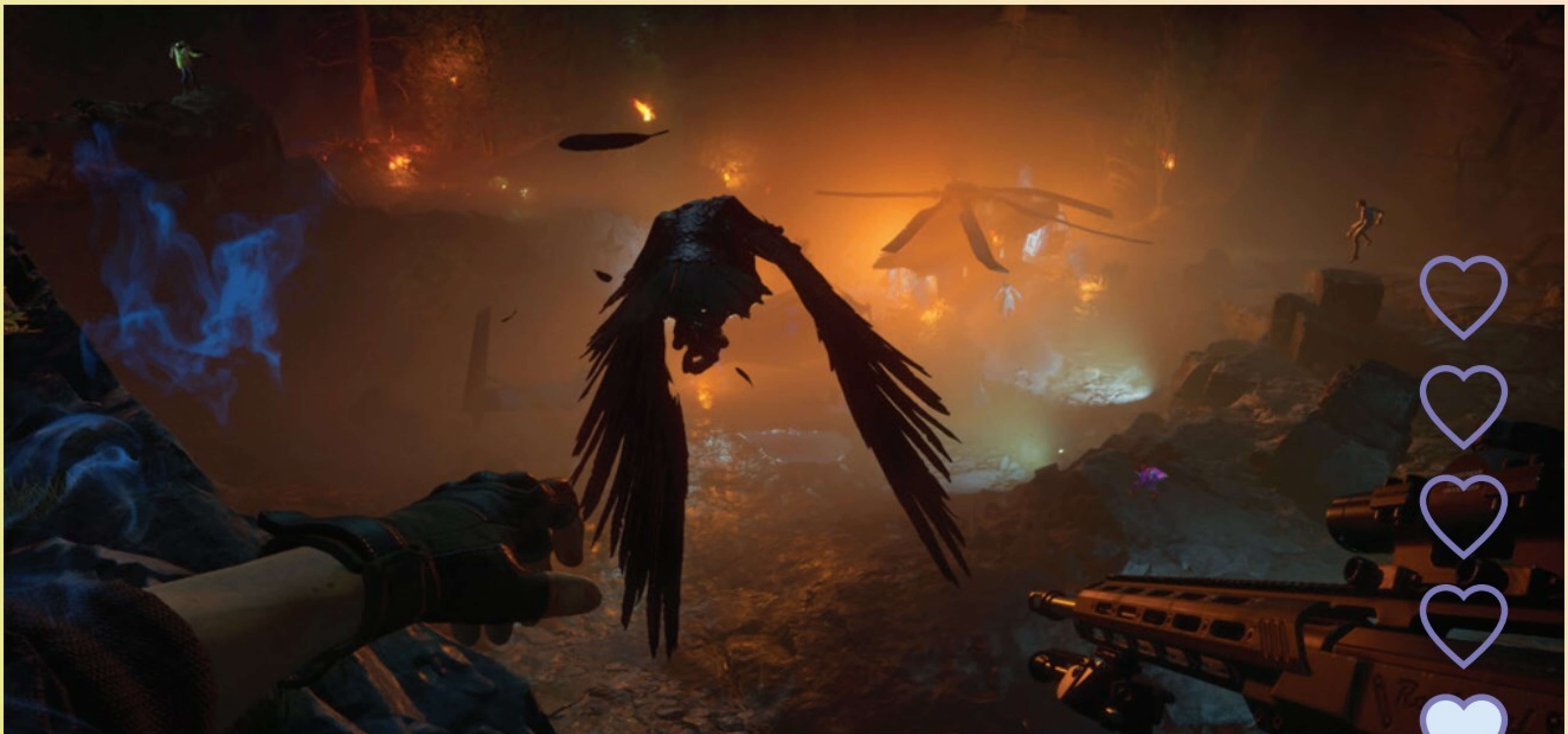
Playing alone or with up to three friends, combining the unique talents of this eclectic group is the difference between success and bloody defeat. However, for those who'd rather play solo, Arkane stresses players can enjoy Redfall as a single-player game (with no A.I. partners in tow). The studio also addresses criticism that Redfall abandons traits that fans enjoyed in Dishonored or Deathloop by emphasizing the game's rich story-driven nature.

Arkane describes the town of Redfall as an open world with plenty of wide spaces and hidden routes for players to explore and uncover. Within its two major districts, expect to encounter cultist strongholds, vampire nests, and battles to reclaim parts of the neighborhood.

Vampires come in several types and aren't your typical fantasy-born bloodsuckers. Rather, Redfall's creatures stem from science gone wrong, with Arkane describing them as "nothing you've seen before." Vampires occupy a hierarchy, with the most dangerous members sitting higher up the totem pole. Powers include psychic abilities, enhanced agility and speed, and other powers we haven't seen yet.

Arkane delayed Redfall from 2022 to early 2023 for polish, but what we've seen so far looks promising. While a co-op shooter isn't something we'd expect from the studio, Arkane has proven it can still strike gold when it branches out. Whether it's the systems-heavy sci-fi action of Prey or the time-looping roguelike template of Deathloop, Arkane finds a way to apply its brand of immersive sims in different ways. We're intrigued to see how Redfall accomplishes the same feat when it comes out next year. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER Arkane Studios **RELEASE** 2023



STAR TREK: RESURGENCE

A deciding factor

Star Trek: Resurgence lets players boldly guide an original crew where no one has gone before. They get to determine the fate of a new team of space explorers and the stakes of an interspecies conflict in a choice-driven adventure. I navigated a tense situation in a recent demo to get a taste of the sorts of decisions players will face and their potential consequences.

Resurgence unfolds in the year 2380, shortly after the events of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, specifically the series' feature films. Players control two central members of the starship Resolute. First up is Petty Officer Carter Diaz, a young, action-hungry engineer residing low on the rankings totem pole. Commander Jara Rydek is an exceptional half-Koblaid leader who recently came aboard the *Resolute*.

Dramatic Labs, a team of ex-Telltale Games employees, leverages its narrative adventure expertise in this non-episodic title. Players engage in choice-driven conversations where decisions influence the story's direction, including the character's fates. Depending on your actions, people may live or die, though Dramatic Labs wouldn't answer if every main character were fair game. Star Trek shines best when stories focus on navigating the webs of diplomacy and relationships over brute force, so designing a game relying on the power of words feels like a perfect fit.

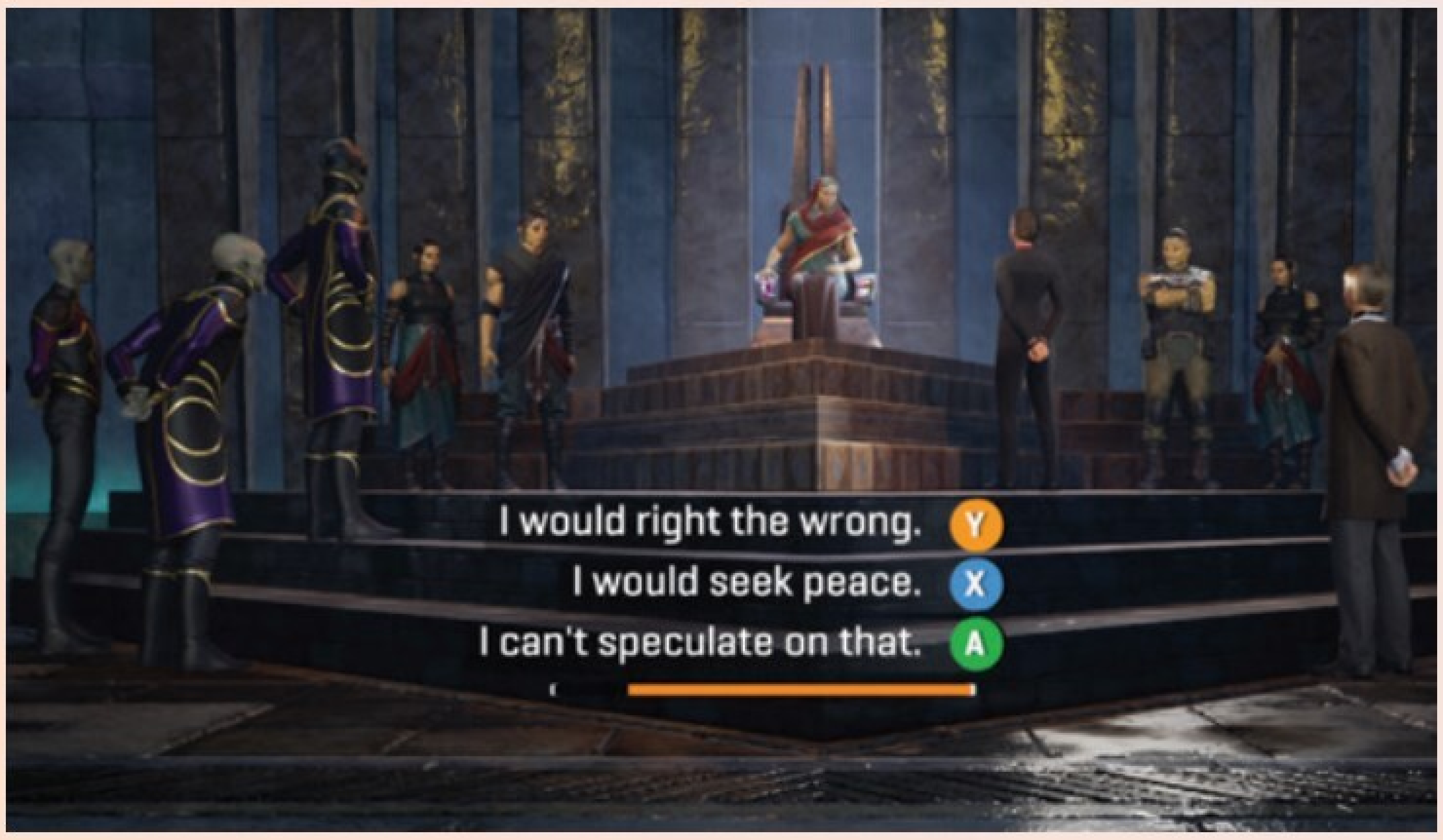
In my demo, Jara attends a trade negotiation between two alien races on the brink of war. Thankfully, she's not alone. Accompanying her is Captain Zachary Solano, an ambitious veteran officer, and Ambassador Spock – yes, that Spock. Although Star Trek: Resurgence predominantly features a new cast, expect to see a few familiar faces.

We meet with the Hotari, a rough and tumble race residing on a moon dense in dilithium, a precious resource. Despite sitting on a figurative gold mine, the Hotari have never been able to reap the benefits fully. That's because mining dilithium requires technology owned by the Alydians, a strict militaristic civilization that has traded in the mineral for decades and hopes to continue this arrangement. The Hotari have served as the Alydian's labor force but now seeks independence. That would threaten the Alydian's access to dilithium and, in turn, its galactic strength.

Jara and Co.'s presence can soothe or agitate the situation depending on your choices. The queen probes me with questions such as my feelings on the Kobloid's less-than-stellar history with the Alydians and how I'd address that. While I try to be as neutral as possible, being put on the spot gets trickier when diplomatic answers disappear, and I must make a hard choice regarding with whom I side. Resurgence doesn't indicate important decisions with a "They will remember this" style prompt, so you won't always know how significant your actions can be. This scene's tension feels effective thanks to the solid performances. Spock's new voice actor, in particular, seems like a respectable replacement for the late Leonard Nimoy.

So far, the worst I can say is that the slice I played stuck a little too closely to Telltale's well-worn template, but Dramatic Labs previously stated the game includes stealth, ship piloting, and, yes, phaser battles. I'll have to wait to see how Jara's choices impact the rest of the story, but fans of Star Trek and Telltale Games have reason to keep Star Trek: Resurgence on their radar. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Dramatic Labs **DEVELOPER** Dramatic Labs **RELEASE** 2022



RESIDENT EVIL 4 REMAKE

A new take on an old favorite

Capcom finally announced the long-rumored, often-leaked Resident Evil 4 Remake in two different trailers.

Most strikingly – and predictably – the new Resident Evil 4 looks better visually than its 2005 counterpart. During the minute-long reveal trailer, we see protagonist Leon Kennedy, antihero Ada Wong, Ashley Graham, Luis, and brief glimpses of antagonists Osmund Saddler and Bitores Mendez. The trailer also shows quick looks at Salazar Castle, the iconic village from the beginning of RE4, and the baddies that inhabit them. The voiceover indicates that the game's story has been expanded and will act as a more direct sequel to Resident Evil 2, which also stars Leon as its protagonist.

The trailer ends with a brief tease that VR content is in development.

A few days later, at the Capcom Showcase livestream, the company showed all of a few seconds of gameplay.

The footage is set during the very beginning of the game outside the village in the forest. Compared to the original game, the forest is far darker and scarier. "We want to nail the feeling of loneliness and fear of not knowing what lies ahead, even more so than the original," producer Yoshiaki Hirabayashi said during the presentation. "Of course, there will also be thrilling battles."

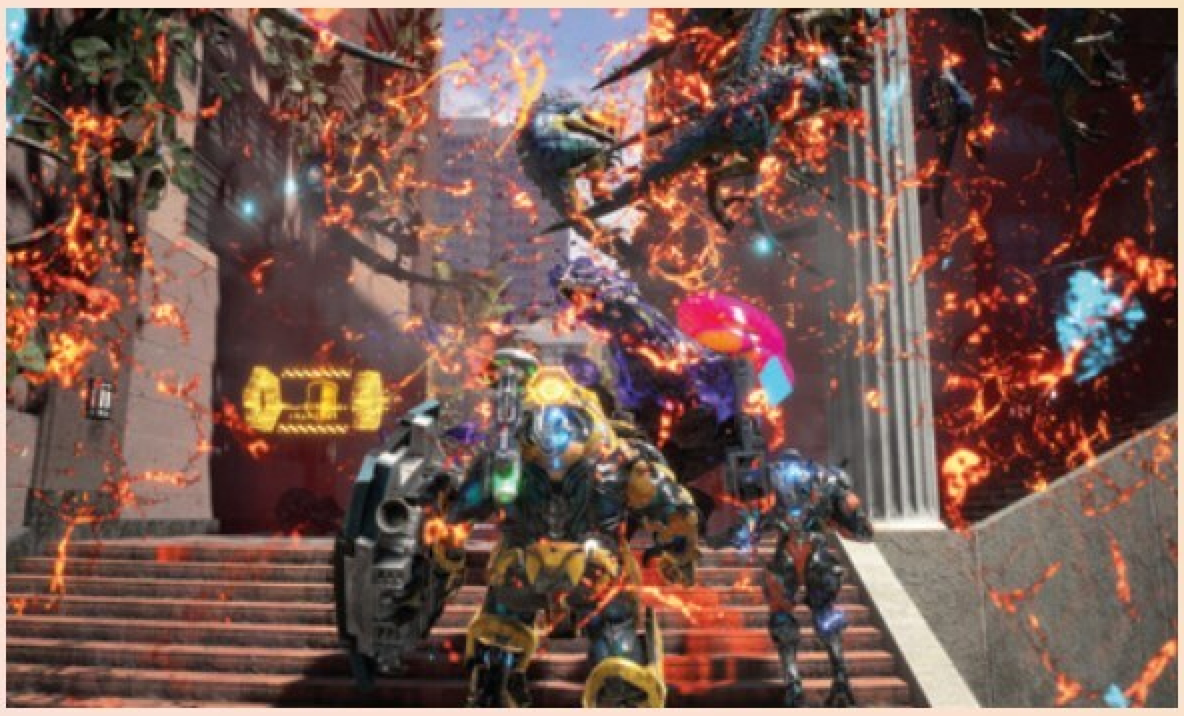
You'd be excused if you expected a glimpse at those thrilling battles, but unfortunately, no such look came. The gameplay ends as Leon walks up to a house in the forest – ostensibly where he encounters the first Ganado, as in the original RE4.

I'm more excited for the Resident Evil 4 Remake than any other game we know about; the original is one of my all-time favorite games. Which makes the all-too-brief gameplay reveal fairly disappointing. Here's hoping we'll get a better look in the future before its March 24 release. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom **RELEASE** March 24

EXOPRIMAL

Forecast calls for dinosaurs



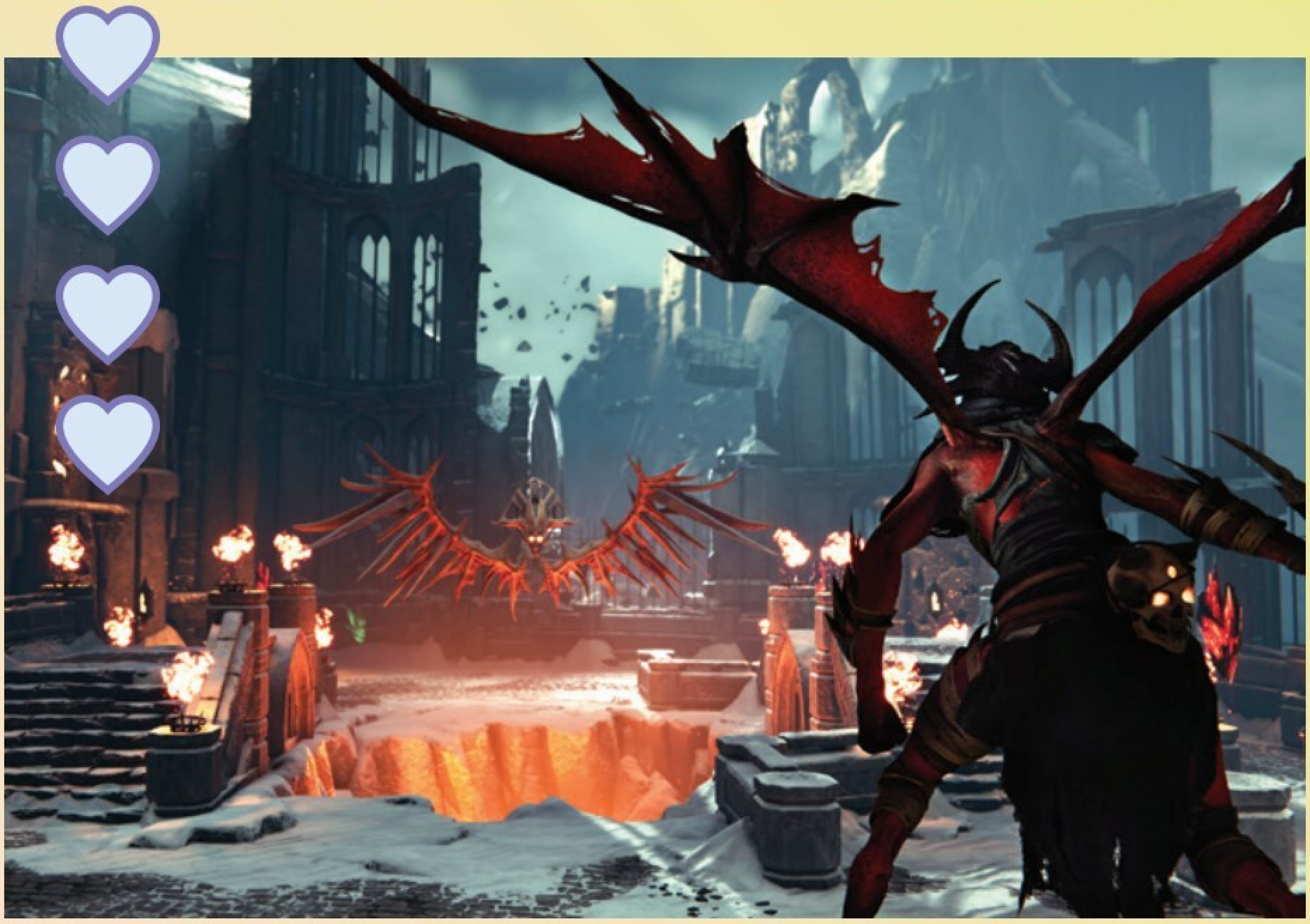
Capcom continues to show off Exoprimal, its upcoming action game in which players control warriors in exosuits fighting off hordes of rampaging dinosaurs. An out-of-control AI called Leviathan unleashes these primordial beasts through rifts in the sky, forcing humans to fight them off in intricate (and frankly inexplicable) wargames – usually at high risk of death and destruction of urban landscapes.

The new project explores an unusual mix of ideas. The progression and leveling of characters and exosuits draw on RPGs. The dino-swarming action is reminiscent of something like Earth Defense Force. The team-based cooperative play, with a mix of assault, tank, and support units, recalls role-based shooters like Overwatch. And a competitive element puts two groups of players in opposition to one another as they try to complete objectives before the other team, adding time pressure into the mix. Suffice to say, ahead of a chance to play it, I'm at a loss to rationalize how it all fits together. Nonetheless, the high-intensity battles seem promising.

Exoprimal's main event is called Dino Survival, where you join a multiplayer team of five and compete against another team to achieve specific goals. Mission objectives are varied and dynamic. In Dinosaur Cull, you hunt and take down one specific dinosaur. VTOL Defense demands your team protect an aircraft on the ground as it's swarmed by charging reptiles. Data Key Security is an escort-style mission in which you must deliver a particular asset from one location to the next. Omega Charge is a mission in which players have access to a swarm-clearing Omega Hammer. And Energy Taker, as you might suspect, is all about gathering more energy than the opposing team.

Capcom has a closed network test planned for Exoprimal, so we should soon understand how it all plays. After that, it will be raining its dinosaurs down onto consoles and PC sometime in 2023. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (10-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Capcom
DEVELOPER Capcom **RELEASE** 2023



METAL: HELLSINGER

Going on rhythmic rampages

The very idea of Metal: Hellsinger appeals to me: Slay demons in a modern Doom-style first-person shooter to the beat of newly recorded tracks from some big names in rock and metal. As someone who grew up playing the original Doom, loves the modern iterations, and has perhaps put more time into the Rock Band series than any other franchise, The Outsiders' upcoming game checks a lot of boxes. Still, coming into my hands-on time with Hellsinger, I was skeptical. Thankfully, the demo I played reinforced that this game is, indeed, for me.

I increase my multiplier by firing guns, slashing my sword, or blasting flames from the head of my disembodied skull to the beat. That multiplier is crucial to the ultimate score at the end of the level. However, there are other reasons to want to hold a multiplier. Chief among them is that as you flow into the upper reaches of the multiplier, the song kicks in full force; what starts as a simple beat with some guitar flourishes into screaming vocals, double-kick-laden drumbeats, and shredding riffs. It sounds simple, but it takes me much of the demo relearning how to play an FPS in this manner.

At first, I'm not good at it. Some guidelines show you when to shoot in time with the beat, but my first inclination upon seeing the demons is spamming the right trigger and slicing and dicing with my equipped sword; it turns out my decades of first-person shooters aren't much help. However, slowly but surely, I get the hang of it, and attacks begin feeling more impactful as I land successive shots in perfect rhythm. Some weapons are easier to shoot to the beat than others. I struggle to keep the rhythm with my shotgun, while the dual pistols make me feel more confident. Much like in Doom, once you damage an enemy enough, they fall into a stunned state, allowing you a devastating finishing blow (causing them to drop health pickups to replenish any you've lost). Unlike the normal attacks, which can be fired off at any time, finishers must be performed to the beat.

As I continue blasting through hordes of demons, attacking in rhythm almost sends me into a flow state. Attacking, dodge-dashing away from incoming attacks, performing on-beat active reloads, and landing finishers to clear rooms feel like second nature thanks to the entrancing-yet-intense metal pumping through my headphones. Once the mechanics click and I retrain my initial FPS instincts, Metal: Hellsinger pulls me in.

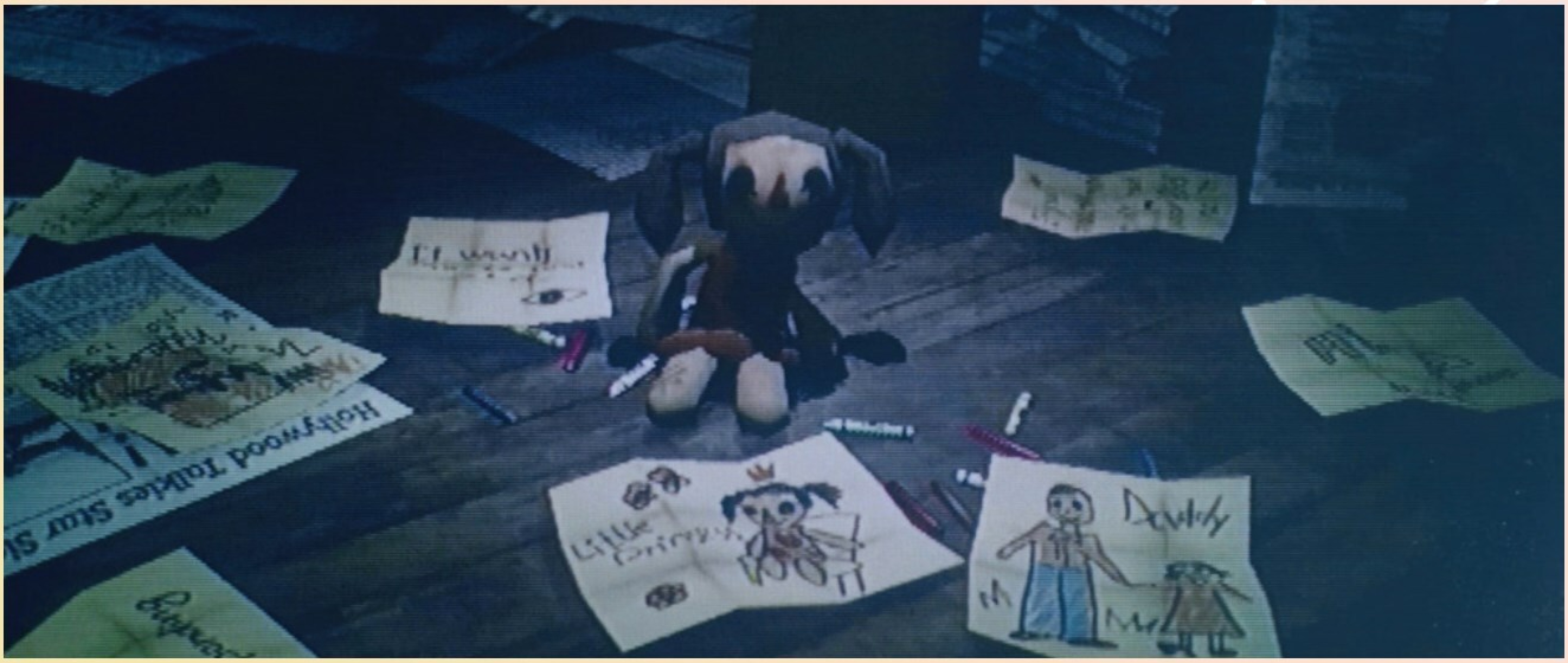
My demo culminates with a boss battle against Judge Aspect. This winged beast has all the mainstay moves you'd expect: waves of fireballs, focused beams of energy, teleportation, and, of course, summoning minions. Aspect's substantial health bar takes a long time to chip away, but thanks to the hordes of minions and a few health pickups on an adjacent piece of land, I finally take the elite demon down and my demo comes to an end.

When Metal: Hellsinger launches, it will feature 10 songs from at least 9 artists, which can be played across 7 levels. With names like Randy Blythe from Lamb of God, Serj Tankian from System of a Down, and Alissa White-Gluz from Arch Enemy providing vocals to the soundtrack, I can't wait to dive deeper into the depths of Hell. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter/Rhythm **PUBLISHER** Funcom
DEVELOPER The Outsiders **RELEASE** September 15

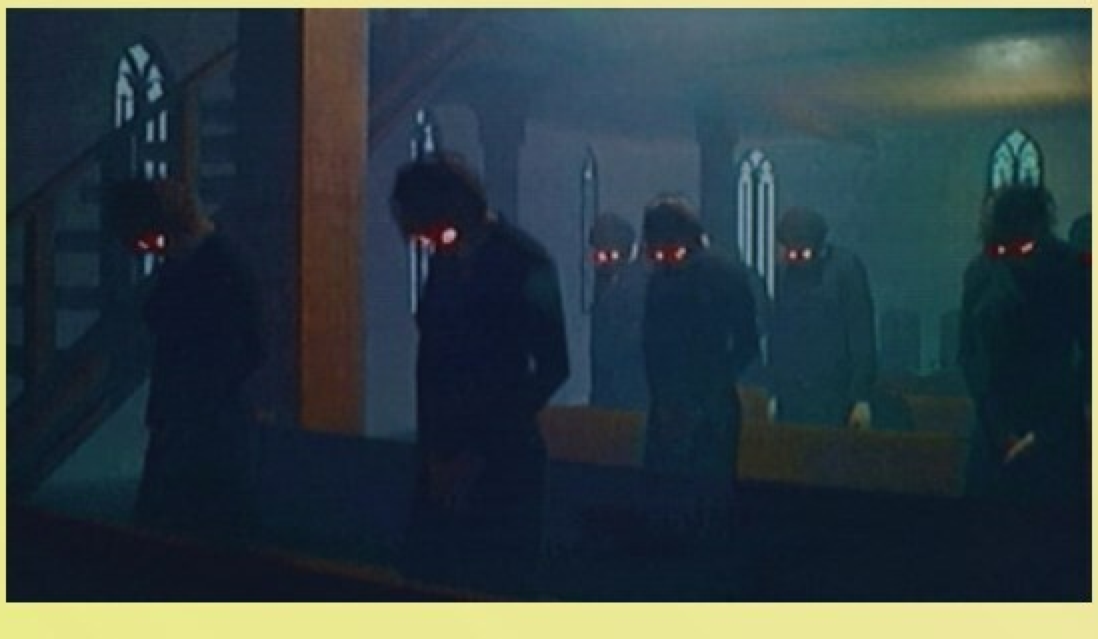
THE FRIDGE IS RED

And the vibes are bad



Easily the highlight of June's Guerilla Collective livestream, The Fridge is Red looks like what you might find if you went video game shopping in Hell. Heavily inspired by PlayStation 1 horror games, it tells the story of Frank, stuck in his basement staring for days at the titular red fridge. "Not only the fear of a terrible death keeps him in place, but also the hope of getting his daughter back," the game's Steam page reads. The Silent Hill inspiration is palpable.

The Fridge is Red is a collection of different horror stories – or "episodes." In the trailer, we see terrifying waiting rooms, people frozen in place, items suspended in midair, church congregations full of glowing-eye patrons, and an elevator ostensibly sending us to the bowels of the underworld. In what's undoubtedly the trailer's most gruesome moment, an eye is gouged out with an elevator button, which adds The Fridge is Red to a small list of games featuring ocular horror, joining the likes of Dead Space 2 and Red Dead Redemption II.



The Steam page describes The Fridge is Red as such: "Liminal spaces, surreal encounters and uncanny strangers. You will see a [sic] completely mundane settings spiraling down into distorted psychological terror." Later, the mature content description reveals that losing a level will cause the player to be eaten by a refrigerator. "There will be such elements throughout the game," the page reads.

The low-poly aesthetic makes The Fridge is Red more unnerving. Because of the lack of detail, the brain fills in the blanks. What's rendered onscreen is nothing compared to what's in our minds. Though aesthetically, it does have some pretty blatant inspirations. The most obvious is PlayStation 1 survival horror games, specifically Silent Hill, though there are also splashes of Resident Evil and the like. Speaking of Silent Hill, it's hard to look at The Fridge Is Red and not immediately think of P.T., the "playable teaser" for the now-canceled Silent Hills game once in development for the PlayStation 4 from Hideo Kojima and Guillermo Del Toro. It also seems to pull from a host of horror films, such as *Ju-On: The Grudge* and *Ring*, two of Japan's most famous horror movies. Mix all that together, and you've got a scary game.

In recent years, there has been a whole host of PlayStation-inspired horror games – so much so that it's become a tired trope in its own right. But The Fridge Is Red stands out compared to its contemporaries, if only because, based on brief looks, it seems to be taking the aesthetic and adding its own spin, not just recreating games from 20 years ago with different coats of paint.

While there's no release date yet, The Fridge is Red's developers recently offered a free playable Steam demo. Taking a cursory look at YouTube, the demo seems popular with streamers, including megastar Markiplier, who included it in his ongoing "SCARY GAMES" video series. As of this writing, the episode featuring The Fridge is Red has 5.4 million views. With attention like that, it may just be the next big thing in horror games – or at least the next big thing in streaming horror games. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Horror
PUBLISHER tinyBuild
DEVELOPER 5Word Team **RELEASE** TBA

SONIC FRONTIERS

Sonic Frontiers proved to be one of the stars of Summer Game Fest's in-person Play Days, showcasing the "open-zone" concept and giving us a feel for the traversal and up-close combat. The proof still lies in how the final product comes together; Sonic controls well in the open world, causing the *GI* crew that got hands-on time to feel optimistic about Sonic's first foray into this game style. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Platforming **PUBLISHER** Sega
DEVELOPER Sonic Team **RELEASE** Holiday

THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

The Callisto Protocol has many stories to tell, and some will take you down alternate routes. Replayability also comes from the brutal deaths protagonist Jacob Lee suffers. These grotesquely animated takedowns showcase dismemberment and worse. On your first playthrough, you should avoid dying, but if you reenter prison for a second time, we recommend letting each creature have a feast. **BY ANDREW REINER**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Krafton **DEVELOPER** Striking Distance Studios
RELEASE December 2

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE II

The sequel to 2019's Modern Warfare reboot expands upon Captain Price and Gaz's covert mission to take down terrorist organization Al-Qatala. They won't be alone this time, as familiar operatives – Ghost and Soap – and new comrades like Graves and Vargas will contribute to the firefights. Of course, the multiplayer will also be enhanced, with deeper weapon customization and the unannounced-but-highly-anticipated changes coming to Warzone 2.0. **BY JASON GUISAO**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Shooter (64-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Activision
DEVELOPER Infinity Ward **RELEASE** October 28

ROUTINE

Unveiled nearly a decade ago, Routine has resurfaced after years of silence. Set on an '80s-inspired vision of a lunar base, players must explore the facility to uncover why it's been abandoned. Malevolent AI machines also hunt you. Developer Lunar Software rebuilt Routine from scratch, and we can't wait to experience its sci-fi terrors. **BY MARCUS STEWART** ■

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Raw Fury **DEVELOPER** Lunar Software **RELEASE** TBA

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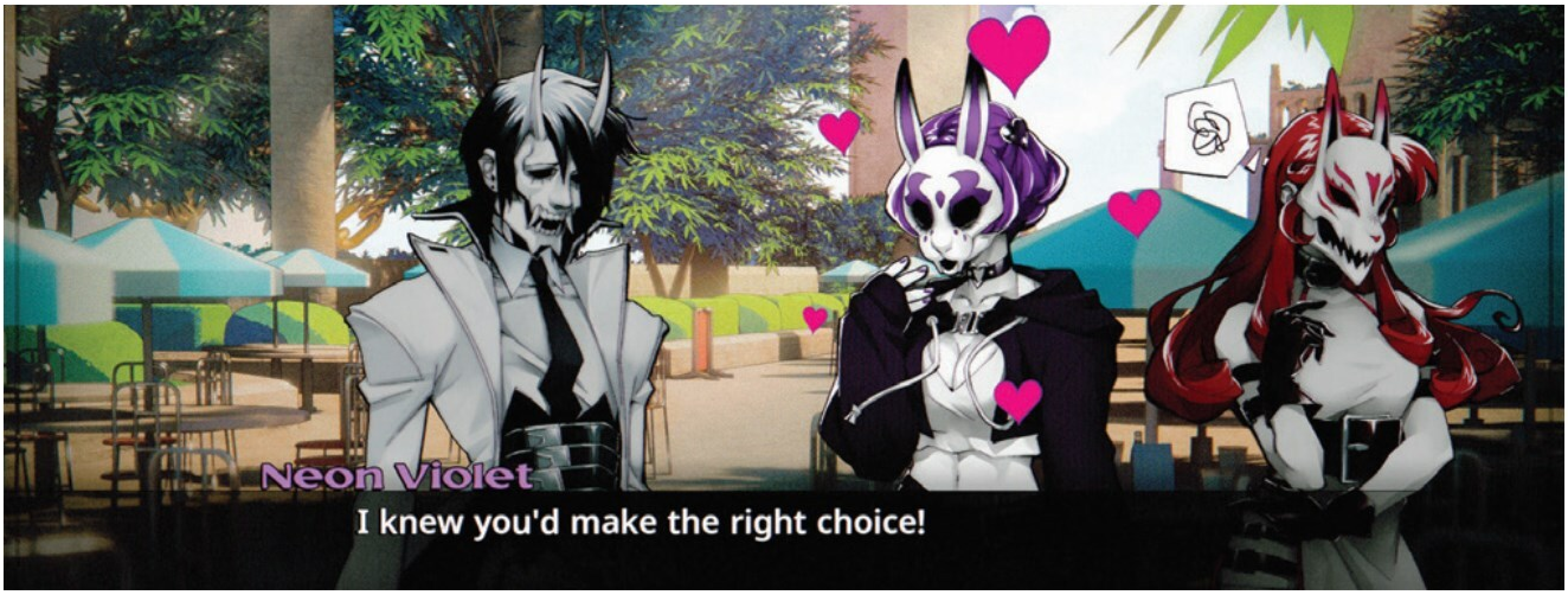
To read all of our reviews, visit GameInformer.com/Reviews

GI MUST PLAY

NEON WHITE

Holy hell



Neon Violet

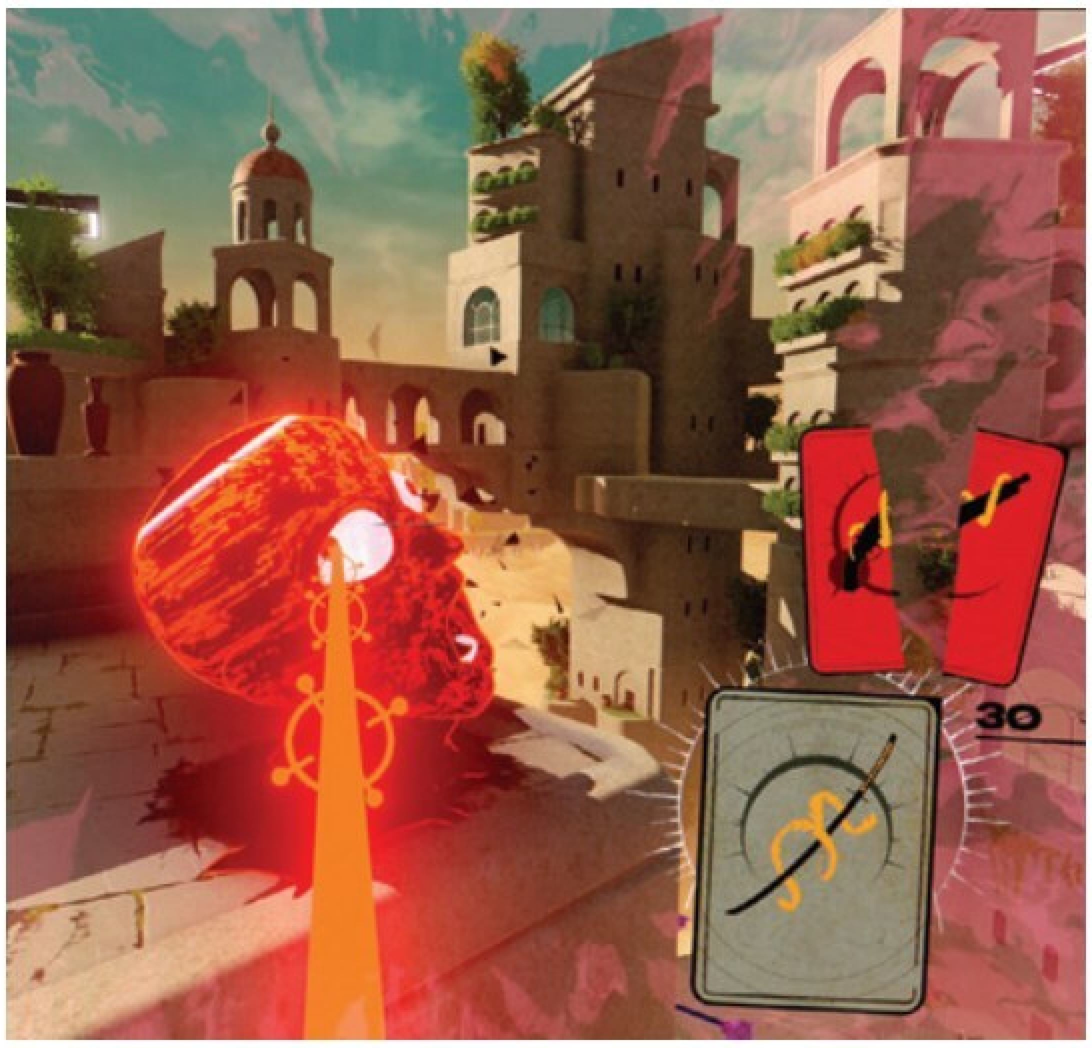
I knew you'd make the right choice!

In a trailer for Neon White, creator Ben Esposito said it's a game made for "freaks." I guess that makes me a freak, then. Because Neon White is my favorite game I've played all year – by a large margin.

You assume the role of Neon White, a dead assassin pulled from Hell for a divine competition. Demons overrun Heaven, so the powers that be task White and a host of damned with cleaning up the mess. They do this by running as fast as possible through various districts of the Pearly Gates, blowing away demons with a varying arsenal of heavenly guns.

With rare exceptions, playing through any level takes less than a minute. Neon White stresses you play as fast as possible at all times and emphasizes replaying levels for better times. Running and jumping feel excellent; they're fluid, quick, and give an impression of floating throughout a level.

But it's the guns where Neon White shines. You pick up firearms via cards, each with two functions. The first is shooting. The second, however, is the discard option, granting a brief platforming advantage. Discarding pistols gives a double jump, rifles shoot you directly forward, rocket launchers give a grapple shot, and so on.



Levels demand mastery; you must run, shoot, jump, and use discards at precisely the right moment, while also killing every demon in a level. I loved retrying levels until I finally got the combination of moves correct, and then I loved, even more, trying to whittle my times down to the "Ace" score. My heart was often in my throat as I crossed the finish line, and few things feel better than besting my times by tenths of a second.

From its mechanical foundation, Neon White is designed around the idea of speedrunning. Flying over enemies, shooting as you rocket above their heads, sending yourself plummeting to earth to slide across narrow ledges. Grappling your way back into the stratosphere, then using explosions to bounce around to the finish line and doing it all in seconds with no mistakes. That's the base of Neon White, not solely the high-level play. It's remarkable for such precise and intricate gameplay to feel so effortless, but Neon White pulls it off. It's one of the most fun games I've played in years.

In fact, I can't stop playing. Nearly 30 hours in, I have no plans of stopping. Luckily, the level design is top-notch and, save for two or three exceptions, rarely frustrating.

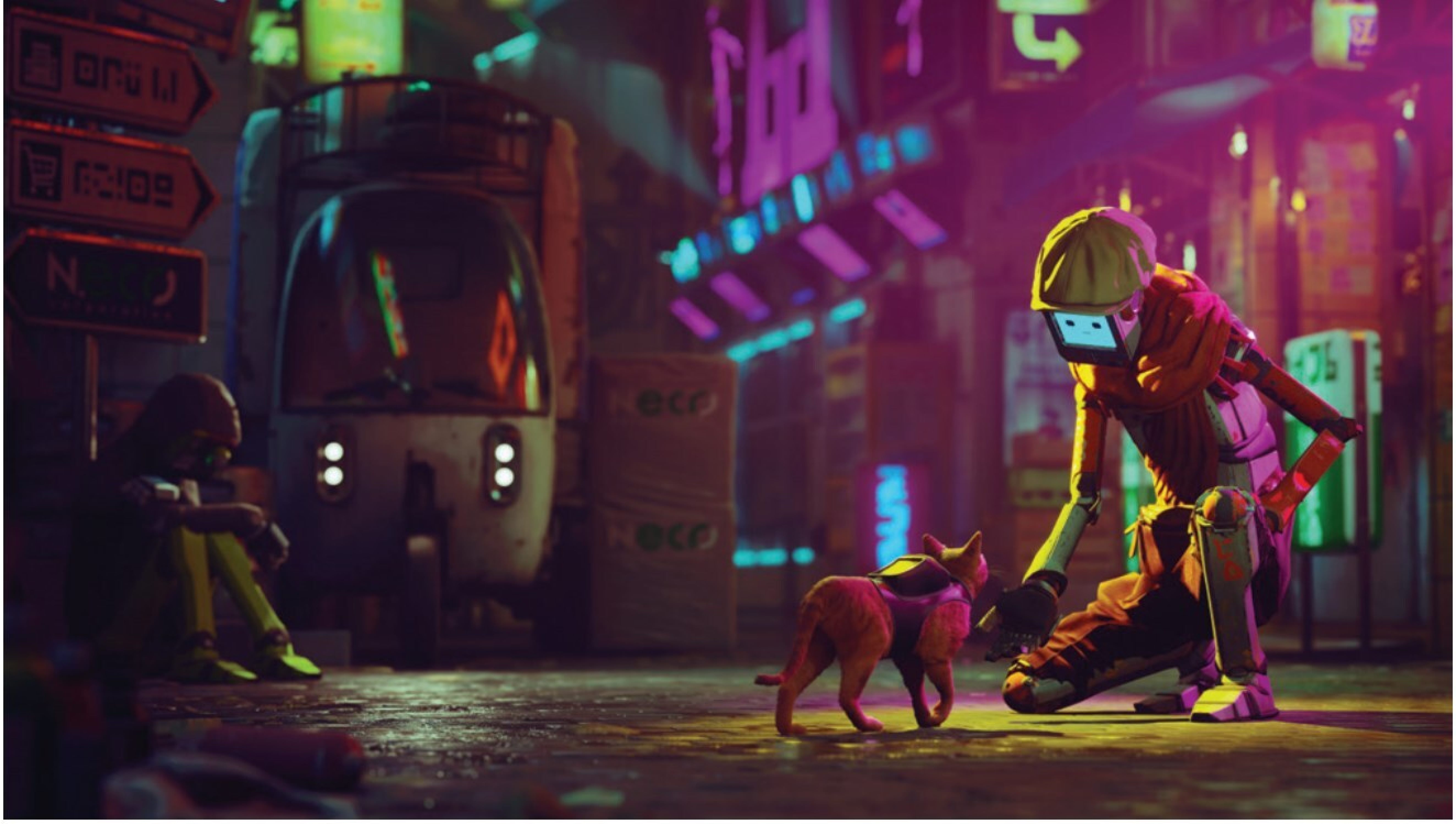
It also helps that aesthetically Neon White scratches specific and neglected itches. It's reminiscent of Japanese action games that don't really exist anymore, like Killer7 and El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron. It recalls anime like *Trigun* and *Cowboy Bebop* and music from now-defunct bands like Drop Dead, Gorgeous, and The Blood Brothers. Its heavenly-yet-violent aesthetic is slick, striking, and full of attitude. Like the tee-shirt section of a Hot Topic and the anime aisle of a Suncoast Video collided into each other. You can imagine 480p AMVs of Neon White playthroughs set to "The Show Must Go On" or "Love Rhymes With Hideous Car Wreck."

If any of that means anything, you are the "really specific" person for whom Esposito made this game. If the above reads like a different language, you'll likely still enjoy Neon White, but you're hardly the key demographic.

Neon White achieves everything it sets out to with remarkable success. Not only is it one of the most entertaining experiences I've played in years, but it also speaks to an extremely particular audience many just don't anymore. It's for weirdos, misfits, and dorks. Neon White is one of the best games of the year, and it'd be a colossal mistake not to check it out. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

9.5

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER Annapurna Interactive **DEVELOPER** Angel Matrix
RELEASE June 16 **RATING** T



STRAY

Furry friends

Stray is a game about being a cat. You see, explore, and mess with the world in the ways only they can. Because you're doing so in one of the more densely-packed video game worlds in recent memory, there's plenty of room for kitty antics. Luckily, Stray wastes no moment letting you fulfill any feline aspirations you may have.

After being separated from their furry friends, the unnamed cat (we'll call "Stray") finds itself deep in an underground city walled off from the outside by a giant dome. Befriending a small drone named B12, Stray sets out to open the city, the wish of many of its android citizens, who have heard rumors but never once seen the sun, clouds, and the like.

Stray makes excellent use of the fact you play as a cat. Because you're such a small, agile creature, you must rethink platforming. A tiny inaccessible ledge in another video game becomes a critical path. A gate might stand in front of your objective, but because you're so tiny, you just slip through its grates. The animation throughout is fantastic, feeling believable to the minute movements cats make – so much so that my dog growled at my computer when I first started playing. Stray constantly finds new opportunities to play with its character – in both significant and minor ways, like pushing things off tables and scratching at doors – and I had a lot of fun discovering these unique interactions while exploring the world.

Inspired by Hong Kong's now-demolished real-life Kowloon Walled City – notable for its strikingly dense architecture and population – Stray's world is artistically fantastic. The underground city is constantly impressive and a joy to explore, from underground sewers to cluttered cityscapes full of neon, from highly-detailed apartments to lonely rooftops. Because it's so densely packed, levels often feel like mazes, and I loved learning my way around their labyrinthian streets.

You spend Stray's four-hour runtime exploring the various districts, meeting citizens, and performing tasks. Stray is apparently the most brilliant cat to ever live, able to solve logic puzzles, understand language, and run hyper-specific errands, and I loved this loop. I was excited every time I entered a new district, knowing a new set of puzzles and conversations awaited me. I enjoyed the occasional dips into combat, stealth, and evasion far less as they never did much interesting with the cat. You more or less just run or hide in a corner or shine a light at enemies until they blow up and call it a day. Luckily these were few and far between, but any time they did pop up, it was monotonous.

While its story is simple, never going beyond surface explorations of the relationships between humans and cities, it's affecting. As I met more citizens, each wrestling with what it means to be alive despite being robots (think Nier: Automata, which the game references), I became invested in the overall world. I also enjoyed the funny and touching relationship between B12 and Stray, who form a solid partnership where the drone helps the cat navigate and understand the world around it.

Stray is, more than anything, a charming game. Its gimmick – you are a cat, do cat things – never gets old; I constantly found it clever for the few hours it took to complete. But more than gimmicks, exploring a world this dense and detailed is a joy, amplified by the unique gameplay being a cat offers. It's a solid, brief ride through a strange world and one well worth taking.

BY BLAKE HESTER

8

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Annapurna Interactive
DEVELOPER BlueTwelve Studio **RELEASE** July 19 **RATING** E10+

MONSTER HUNTER RISE: SUNBREAK

For someone already invested in Monster Hunter, there's plenty to love in Sunbreak. Just don't expect to see a lot of new content in the opening hours. **BY JOHN CARSON**

7.75

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom **RELEASE** June 30 **RATING** T

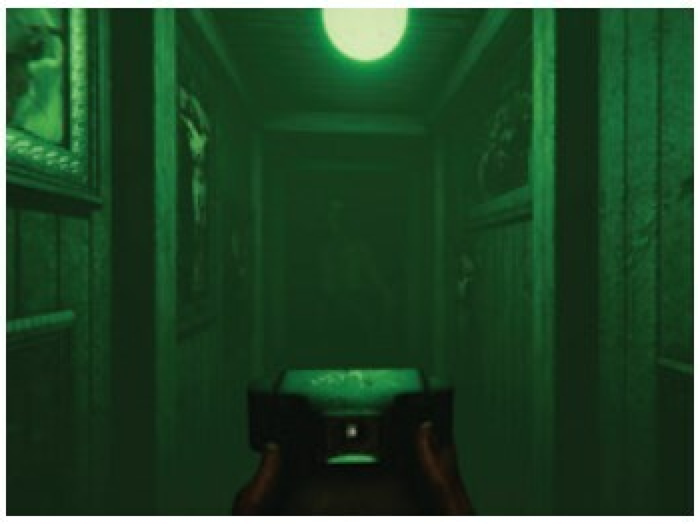
CUPHEAD: THE DELICIOUS LAST COURSE

It's more Cuphead at the end of the day, but I had a great time revisiting Studio MDHR's wonderful animated universe, testing my mettle against its villains, and feeling fist-pumping triumph again. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

8.75

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Studio MDHR **DEVELOPER** Studio MDHR **RELEASE** June 30 **RATING** E10+

MADISON



Madison succeeds in building tension and puzzle variety, and stumbles when it becomes obsessed with bamboozling players with head-tilting solutions and stopping their hearts with lame jump scares. But when the game hits right, you'll be glad no one caught the look on your face.

BY MARCUS STEWART

7.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Bloodius Games **DEVELOPER** Bloodius Games **RELEASE** July 8 **RATING** M

SONIC ORIGINS

TIME 0:36
RINGS 9
SONIC
3

Having the best versions of the classic Sonic saga in one bundle is supremely satisfying. Anniversary Mode's enhancements make the experience more enjoyable than ever before. Sonic Origins is a worthwhile package even in a gaming landscape where most of these games are already available to download on every platform. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Platforming **PUBLISHER** Sega **DEVELOPER** Sega, Headcannon **RELEASE** June 23 **RATING** E

FIRE EMBLEM WARRIORS: THREE HOPES

If you like Fire Emblem: Three Houses, you should play Fire Emblem Warriors: Three Hopes, and I'd recommend it to you even if you aren't familiar with the Musou genre. And if you haven't played Three Houses, there's a good chance it'll be your next game after rolling credits on this one. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC** ■

8

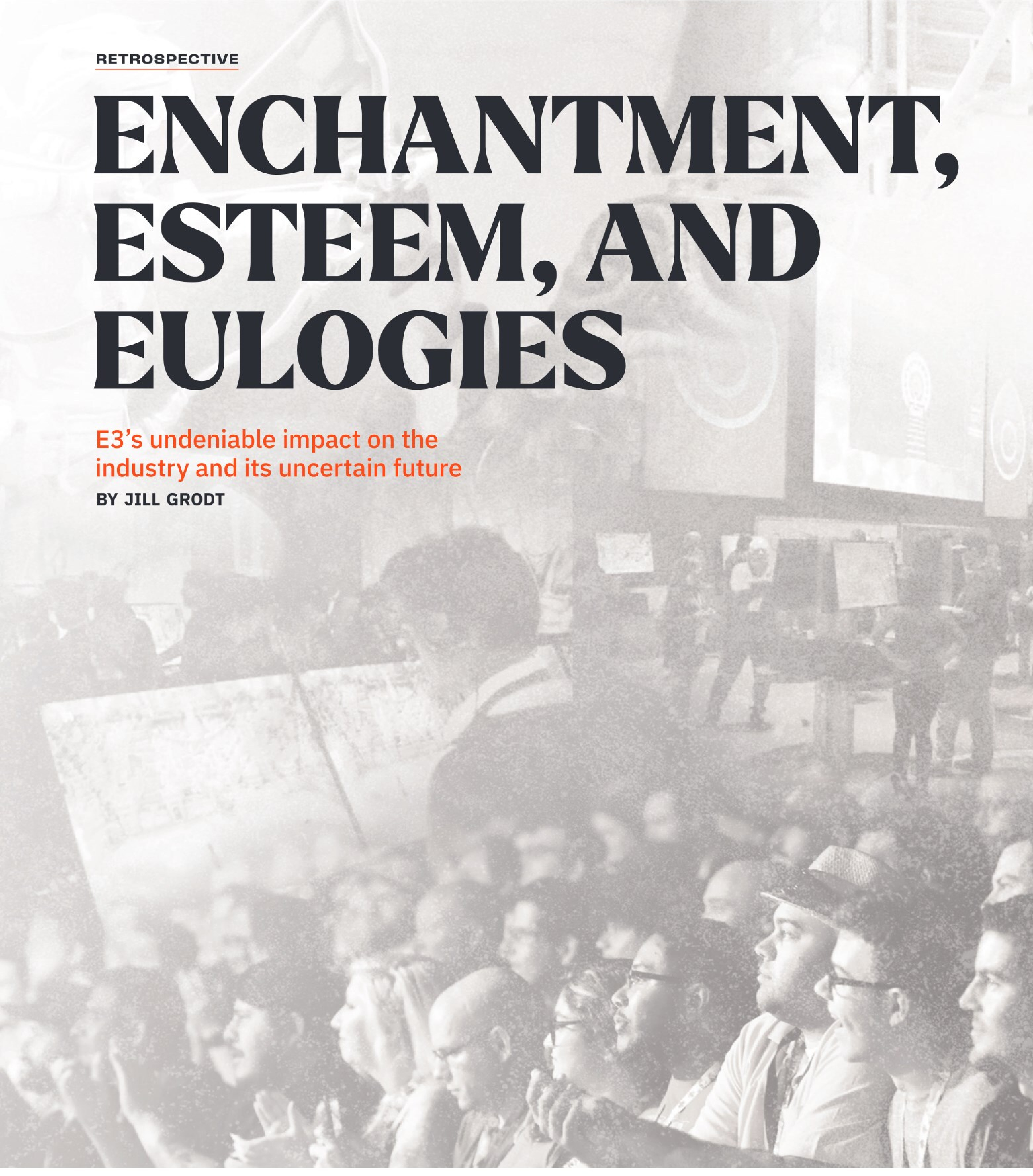
PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Omega Force, Intelligent Systems **RELEASE** June 24 **RATING** T

RETROSPECTIVE

ENCHANTMENT, ESTEEM, AND EULOGIES

E3’s undeniable impact on the industry and its uncertain future

BY JILL GRODT



E3 2019
#E32019
EXHIBITOR REGISTRATION
SOUTH HALL

"DO YOU MISS E3 IN-PERSON EVENTS?"

GEOFF KEIGHLEY READS CALMLY.

It would not have been, all things considered, an unusual question to ask one of the game industry's leading personalities. The Entertainment Software Association's Electronic Entertainment Expo, better known as E3, has long been a dominating feature of the summer. But in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ESA hasn't been able to open the doors to the highly regarded in-person convention.

However, Keighley is the driving force behind Summer Game Fest, a newly established but increasingly successful showcase effectively competing with E3. The query came from one of the many viewers who tuned in to see him speak candidly on YouTube following the Xbox/Bethesda showcase, one of Summer Game Fest's crowning jewels. Keighley's answer notably dropped any mention of the ESA's show.

Admittedly, talking about the rival event and the current, contentious shape of the summer showcases is a strange way to begin a look back at the renowned show. But, curiously, the question above underscores just how impactful E3 has been for the game industry. Without the apparent intention to slight Summer Game Fest's producer, the viewer conflates the idea of a summer gaming convention with E3. The question concisely articulates what the show still means to many: a traditional, inevitable, and unshakable mainstay of the industry's yearly agenda – even if E3 has undergone cancellations, adjustments, criticisms, and competition in the last few years. Despite its recent stumbles, the expo continues to hold on to its carefully cultivated clout, which goes back decades.

Geoff Keighley
Summer Game Fest creator and host

Foundations of Gaming's Biggest Show

The first E3 took place in 1995. Some might argue the Game Developers Conference (GDC), first held in a California living room back in 1988, can claim a longer history, but GDC didn't coalesce into the shape we recognize today until 1996, the same year as the first Tokyo Game Show. Other current popular game-centric events, like PAX and Gamescom, didn't hit the scene until the early 2000s. And according to *Kinda Funny* co-founder and one-time E3 host Greg Miller, that long legacy is what makes the show gaming's biggest.

"What makes E3 such an event is its history," Miller tells *Game Informer*. "E3's reputation precedes itself. And it grew by leaps and bounds because the more people would talk about it or report on it, the more people would read that. And then the more people would be inspired [to say], 'Oh, I want to go to that.'"

It's hard to argue with him. E3 has been around for 27 years, meaning an entire generation of gamers have never lived in a world where the show didn't exist. Many up-and-coming game journalists entered the profession hoping to cover the expo. It was the industry's white whale. And numerous veteran writers still recall the excitement of its rise, realizing their niche hobby was jumping into the wider consciousness.

"I remember getting that first E3 badge and being like, 'Oh my gosh, I've made it,'" Miller recalls. That was 15 years ago when he was still writing for *IGN*. But despite the many conventions Miller would later attend, he explains the ESA's show had an element of magic. "E3 was always this event where the excitement was crackling," he says. And he's not the only recognizable personality with long-time veneration for the convention.

"22 years ago, I walked into the first E3 as a wide-eyed 15-year-old kid who didn't quite know his place in the world. E3 Expo brought my hobby out of my computer and into mainstream culture," writes Geoff Keighley. The expo's future competitor used this line in 2017 to introduce the world to his new, interview-focused E3 offering, the E3 Coliseum. Its panels brought developers, publishers, industry insiders, and more together to dive deep into some of gaming's most anticipated projects.

"To be honest," Keighley continues, "the spectacle of E3 convinced me that I should devote my career to this incredible medium." The allure of the busy show floor and spotlighted stage wasn't limited to just video game media; it attracted people from every corner of the industry.

Magic On and Off the Stage

Though now retired, former Nintendo of American president Reggie Fils-Aimé is one of the industry's most recognizable faces and no stranger to the E3 stage. In a recent interview with *Game Informer's* Brian Shea, he reminisced over his introduction to the show with the famous words, "My name is Reggie. I'm about kicking ass, I'm about taking names, and we're about making games." It was a moment that not only endeared him to the gaming audience at large but also underscored how unexpected, compelling, and influential the live shows could be. Fils-Aimé became an almost overnight sensation, proving E3's stage was the place where a personality-laden speaker could make a powerful impression on gamers.

Thanks to new technologies, the overflowingly popular shows were beginning more and more to aim directly at the target fanbase. This shift helped make gaming executives – like Mario creator Shigeru Miyamoto, who came out wielding the Master Sword the same year as Fils-Aimé's debut – and their products household names.

"The reputation of E3 goes hand in hand with the coming up – and I'm old, of course –but the coming up of the internet. It starts from me reading *EGM*," recalls Miller, referencing the *Electronic Gaming Monthly* print magazine that served as many pre-internet gamers' source of news. "But then it becomes running out of class and going to *IGN*, going to *GameSpot* being like, 'What has gotten announced? What's happening?'"

With so many new audience members eager to hear the updates spilling out from its stage, the summer showcase rose to even higher prominence. Miller describes E3 as becoming a "giant runaway huge event" unlike any other trade show.

"You'd see Nintendo and PlayStation and Xbox and Konami and everybody side-by-side out there to talk about what they're doing and really have this thing of, 'We've all agreed, there's this unspoken contract that this is where we will go, and we will tell you where the next 12 months of gaming are going to take you,'" Miller says. "That's what made E3 'E3.' It was this idea of the industry coming together to talk about where they're going."

While it's easy to see how that electrified atmosphere could affect viewers, who went away excited for the newly revealed titles, Fils-Aimé explained to *Game Informer* how the show's power began transforming things behind closed doors in the industry's biggest companies. According to Fils-Aimé, his famous debut lines – and the fans' viral reaction to them – changed the way Nintendo evaluated all future gaming presentations. After 2004, the home of Mario, Zelda, and more started to comb through fans' online responses to press conferences carefully. It would then incorporate that information into the corporation's marketing strategy. But while E3 was large enough to affect various facets of the industry, it was far from impervious to the winds of change.

Reggie Fils-Aimé

Former president and COO of Nintendo of America

GREG MILLER ON E3 AND HIS CAREER

In-person shows have been essential for the game industry as these events facilitate finding work and making vital connections with peers, fans, and employers. And there was no bigger venue for that than the long-time, industry-centered Electronic Entertainment Expo. But its career-boosting properties aren't always apparent. When asked whether he believes the show influenced his career success, *Kinda Funny* co-founder and CEO Greg Miller took an uncharacteristic pause.

"I mean, I think I'd be remiss if I say it hasn't affected my career," Miller eventually responds. "The problem is, I think it has affected it in so many ways that are so small. But, you know, I've been around for so long. And I've made so many – not even to use friends like we're going to go grab a beer – but I've made so many acquaintances in the video game industry. I remember when I'd come on for one or two interviews during an *IGN* live show. And when you do that kind of thing – as we've seen throughout the industry is for better or worse – that's usually a gig you'll do over and over again."

"[E3 gave] me those kinds of opportunities and those kinds of 'at bats' to get in there and really earn my keep and prove that I'm good at talking. Then I can be put on the grandest stage of them all and eventually get to the point where even E3 themselves say, 'Okay, well, you should come in and host for us professionally.' E3 has been a key success metric, I guess, every year of how I'm doing. It seems like the opportunities keep getting grander and grander."

The King is Dead, Long Live the King

Inevitably, any conversation about E3 will feature the participants questioning each other about the first time they attended. I couldn't resist asking Miller, but it led down an unexpected path. Without delay, he replies that the first E3 he attended was in 2007, following this up with something slightly startling.

"And it's notable, of course, because it was the year E3 died."

For such a lively, energetic show, the phrase 'E3 is dead' has been a constant refrain. No matter what had happened during the event – awesome reveals, intriguing news, et cetera – someone would declare its certain demise. However, Miller has a pretty good reason for his assertion.

"My first E3 was the Santa Monica E3, where *Gamecock* had a funeral procession through the streets of Santa Monica for it. And we bounced around to a million different little locations trying to get to it before they were like, 'You know? This is actually worse. We will bring back E3 the traditional way the next year.'"

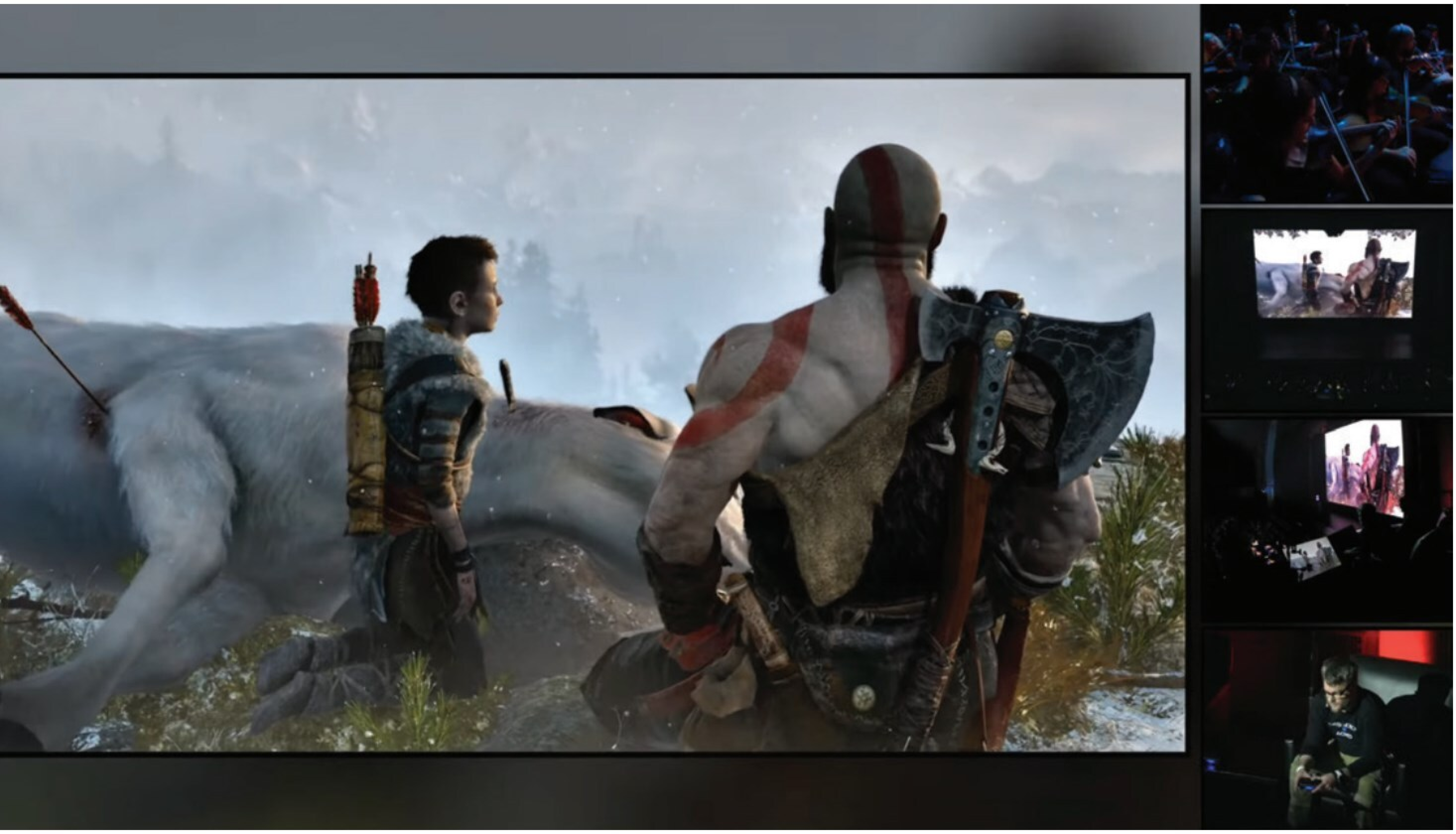
In 2008, the organizers brought the, at that point, 13-year-old showcase back to its familiar home in the Los Angeles Convention Center, but it was far from a traditional experience. The past year's move had been the symptom of the expo's ongoing identity struggles, not its cause. Hoping to brand itself as a place for the industry's insiders, the ESA strictly limited E3's 2008 guest list. Only about 5,000 people walked through the deserted-feeling convention halls, which could easily accommodate ten times that number. The wildly restricted turnout still holds the record for the show's lowest attendance.

But E3 wasn't dead, and over the next decade, it became just as popular as ever. Years like 2016, where Sony revealed its God of War reboot, announced Marvel's Spider-Man, debuted Horizon Zero Dawn gameplay, and more, earned their way into gaming showcase history. E3 began selling an almost record-breaking number of badges every year and, once again experimenting with what it wanted to be, even opened its doors to the public.

Everything changed in 2020. For the first time in its over two-decade life span, E3 was canceled. The abrupt action left an obvious vacuum, which game makers and promoters attempted to fill with their own digital showcases. Trying to adjust to the needs of the time, E3 came back in 2021 as an online-only event, boasting hosts from around the industry, including Greg Miller, Jacki Jing, and Alex "Goldenboy" Mendez. However, the show was again canceled in 2022. Talking with *The Washington Post*, ESA president and CEO Stan Pierre-Louis recently announced that E3 is set to make a comeback next year.

"We're excited about coming back in 2023 with both a digital and an in-person event," Pierre-Louis said. "As much as we love these digital events, and as much as they reach people and we want that global reach, we also know

Stan Pierre-Louis
ESA president
and CEO



that there's a really strong desire for people to convene – to be able to connect in person and see each other and talk about what makes games great."

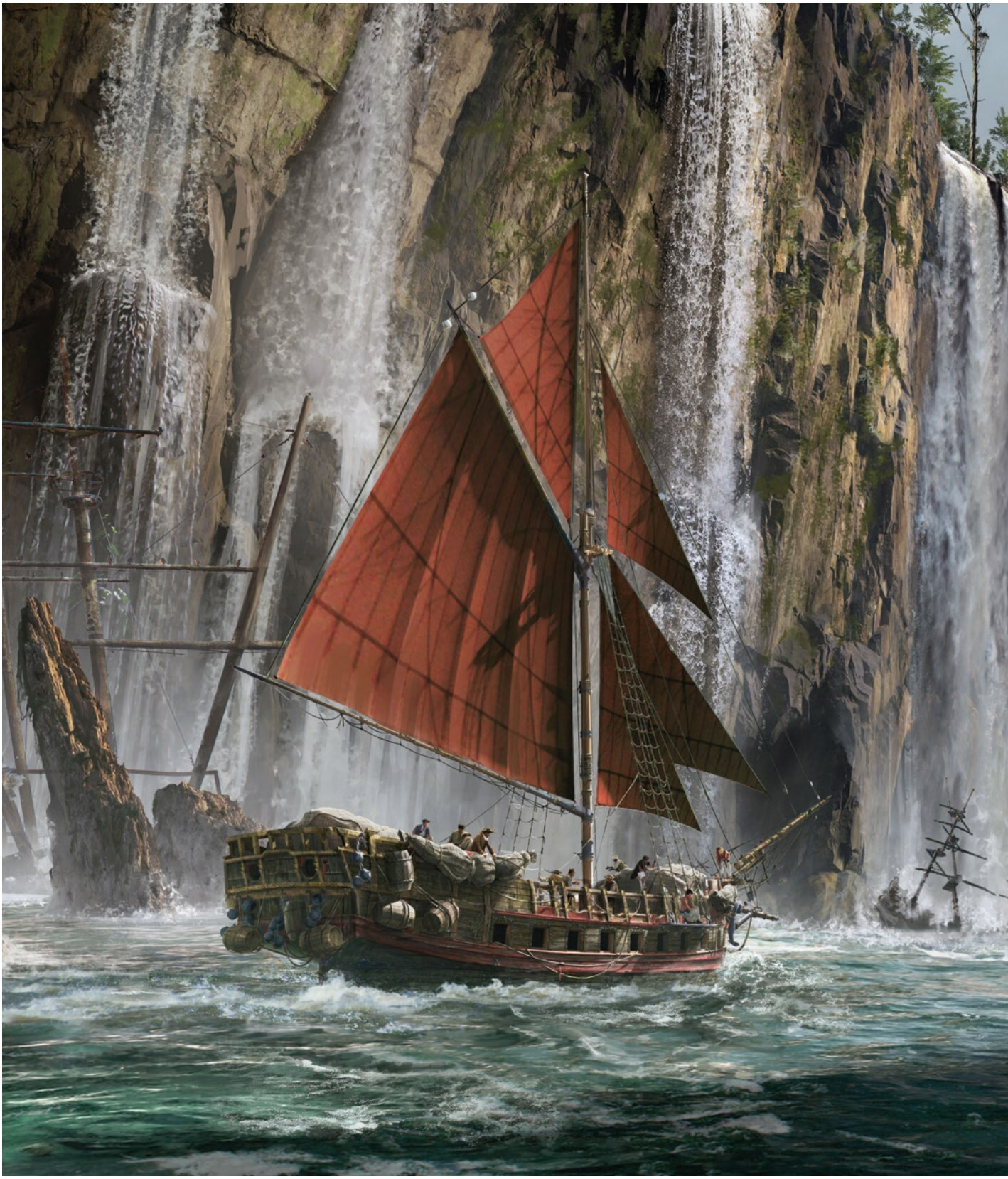
Despite the CEO's confidence in E3 and the importance of an in-person convention, it is uncertain if it will be safe to hold a large-scale conference next year. Other shows, like GDC and PAX, have put on physical events, but ensuing COVID cases dogged both. However, it seems like the ESA is going full speed ahead with its plans as it announced a partnership with ReedPop, the company behind New York Comic Con, Star Wars Celebration, and PAX. This unprecedented team-up hints that E3 will continue to move away from its industry-focused image, becoming an event for the public like other gaming conventions when it returns in June 2023. And once again, E3 seems poised to wrestle with its identity, leaving its future unclear.

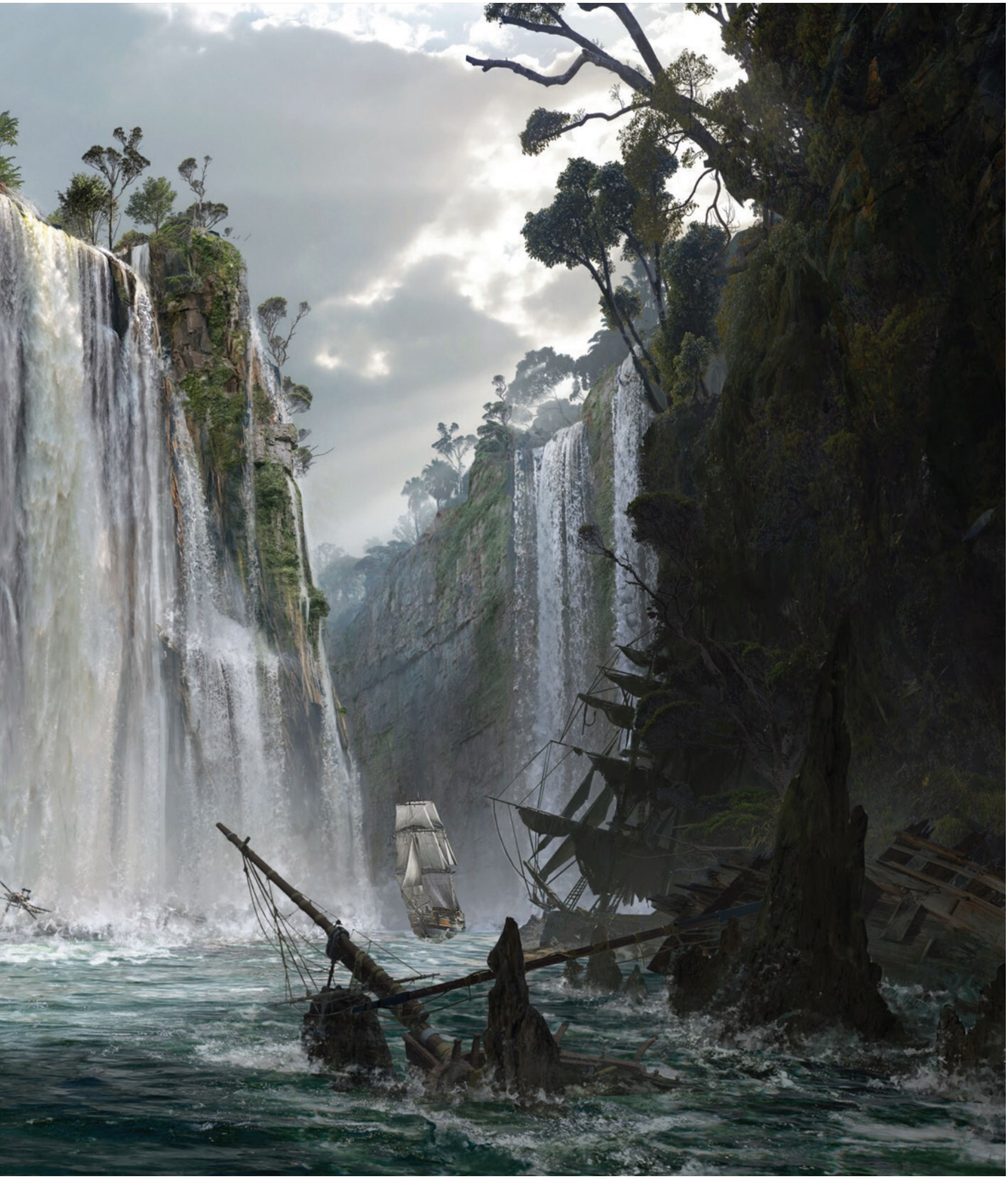
"I don't know what E3 is anymore," says Miller when asked if the show is still the grand event it once was. "I think E3 doesn't know what E3 is anymore. And I think that comes from a multi-front war. You have Geoff Keighley moving in on their turf and doing a great job with Summer Game Fest. You have COVID changing the way the world and the industry work in general. And then you have this show that already was struggling with, 'Are we for consumers? Are we for the press? Are we for the industry?' Where does all that net out? I feel like we haven't seen E3 have the chance to really negotiate that water and figure out what they want to be and what they're going to become."

As I speak to him, it seems like the *Kinda Funny* co-founder would accept a new era of summer showcases. However, gaming's long-time 'biggest show' isn't ready to relinquish its crown, and Miller is still cheering it on.

"I would be heartbroken if E3 went away," he says. "I think for all its warts and problems, E3 is something special, both for the people who attend and the audience back home watching. I love E3, and I want it to succeed. But I want E3 to succeed doing the right thing. I don't want it to just exist to exist. I want it to exist because it's benefiting the industry, the fans, the publishers, the developers, you name it. It needs to work for everybody." ■

THANK YOU FOR PLAYING





↘ **From our cover story:** While most of the action takes place on the high seas, inlets and rivers such as these hold their own share of secrets.

Developed by Ubisoft Singapore / Published by Ubisoft

ONE LAST THING

SHANTY SING-ALONG

SKULL AND BONES BRINGS BACK one of the most popular features from Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag – the accompaniment of sea shanties sung by your crew as you sail. Some shanties help build out the fiction of the game world, while others aim for geographical authenticity, like certain songs sung in Malagasy, a language of Madagascar. Here are the lyrics to one of the included shanties if you'd like to prepare for belting along.

Old Sainte-Anne

Say, were you ever in Old Sainte-Anne.
Sainte-Anne, Old Sainte-Anne!
You eat what you find, and you drink what you can.
Only in Old Sainte-Anne!

Who did you meet there, and what was her name?
Sainte-Anne, Old Sainte-Anne!
I don't know her name, but she played a good game.
Only in Old Sainte-Anne!

What did you do? Did you dig for your gold?
Sainte-Anne, Old Sainte-Anne!
I guess I'll keep digging until I get old.
Only in Old Sainte-Anne!

What did you drink? Did it make you go blind?
Sainte-Anne, Old Sainte-Anne!
I only get drunk on the very best kind.
Only in Old Sainte-Anne!

What did you eat? Did it cost you a tooth?
Sainte-Anne, Old Sainte-Anne!
I don't know how many, to tell you the truth.
Only in Old Sainte-Anne!

When will you go back to Old Sainte-Anne?
Sainte-Anne, Old Sainte-Anne!
I'm watching the weather; as soon as I can.
Only in Old Sainte-Anne!
Only in Old Sainte-Anne!

Visit GameInformer.com for additional details on Skull and Bones, including more about the game's music and audio design. ■

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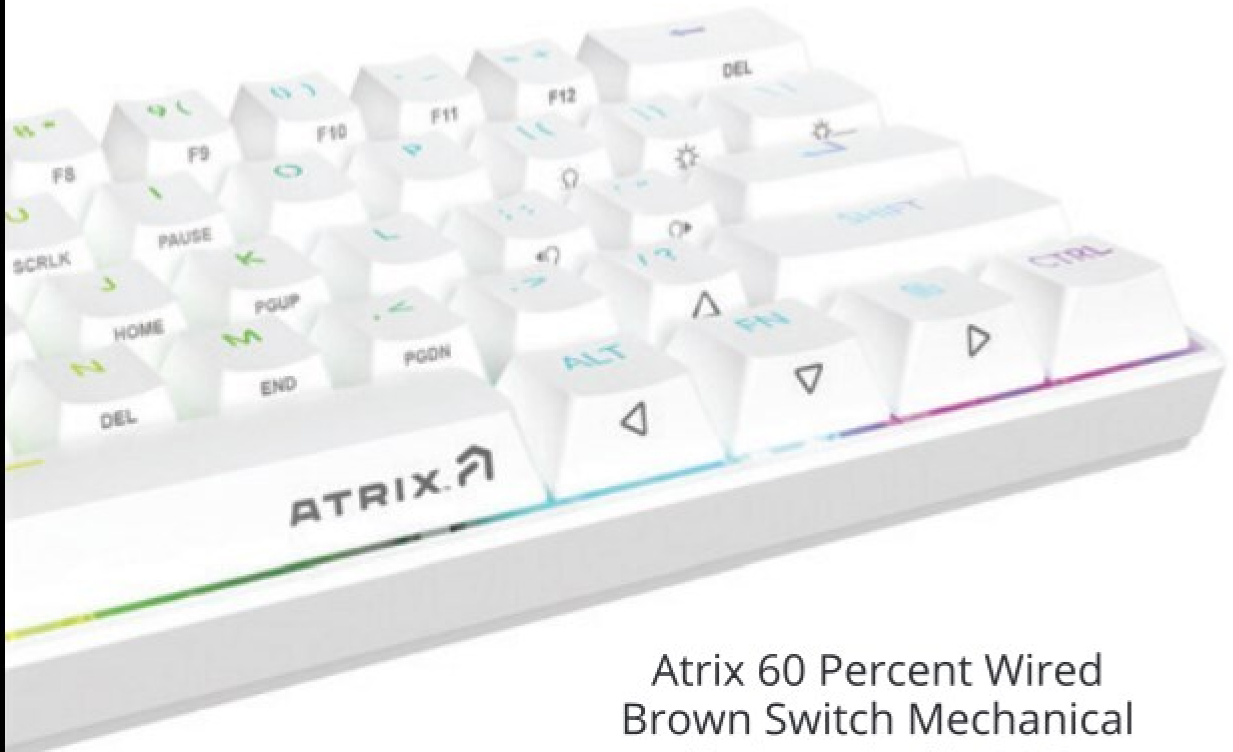

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